R. Garcia y Robertson: The Spiral Dance

FDC58370

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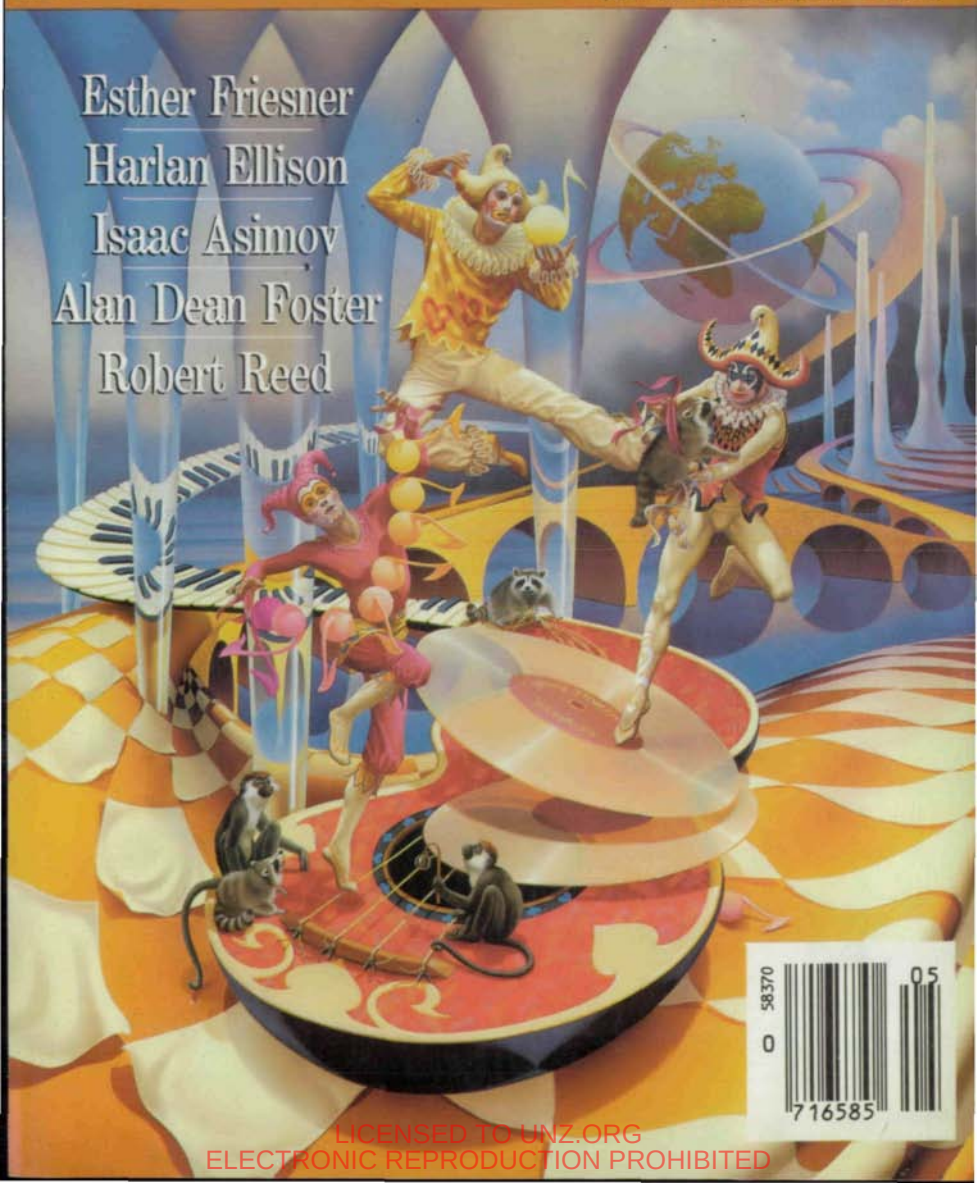

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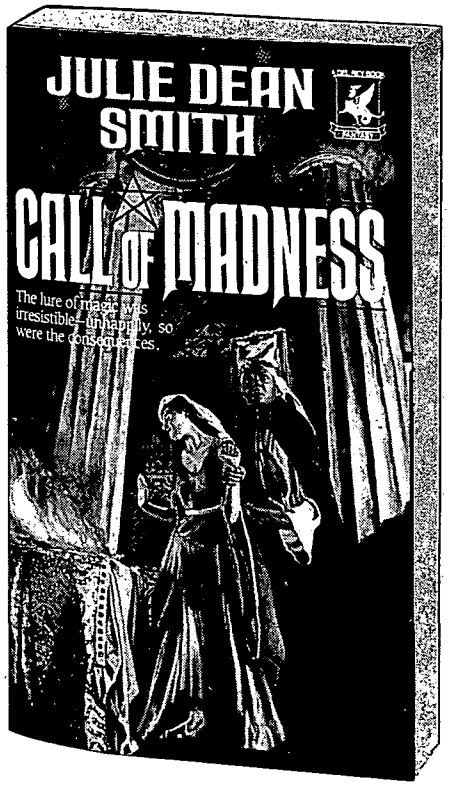

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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MAY • 41st Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 78, No. 5, Whole No. 468, May 1990. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annual subscription $21.00; $26.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1990 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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R. Garcia y Robertson wrote "Cast On A Distant Shore" (April 1989) and "The Auld Religion," (January 1990). "The Spiral Dance" follows after "The Auld Religion," picking up the same characters some four months later; however it is not necessary to have read the earlier story to enjoy this wonderful historical fantasy. Its author writes that the story is pure imagination, but "it is based on one hard historical truth; in the century that followed the Witch Law of 1563 it was roughly as common for a woman in Scotland to be executed for witchcraft as it is for a 20th century person in the U.S. to die in a traffic accident."

THE SPIRAL DANCE

By R. Garcia y Robertson

"Spring, sweet spring, the year's pleasant King;
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring. . ."
— *Thomas Nashe 1567-1601*

The Kirk on the Green

COUNTESS ANNE OF Northumberland stood at the brink of the dance. Swaying to the ill-tuned fiddles. Smelling Jock Barley's Blood simmering in the still-pot. The Sabbath dance of these border Scots seemed infectious. Anne thought it must be a mania, a madness strong enough to carry away the most sober heads. She felt tempted. The whirling Scots, the skirling pipes, the bubbling barley spirits, nearly swept her away — but Anne neither danced nor drank. She was still a wary stranger in Scotland.

Piping ceased, cut off in mid measure. Hearing hoofbeats on the green,

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Anne rose to her toes to look past the crowd. Women in wide skirts and celtic coats parted from men in leather breeches and lumpy hose, making a path for the horsemen. Anne reached out for Alison, her young handmaid, feeling responsible for the girl.

A party of riders in half-armor and pot helms came clattering up on border hobbys, bearing hackbutts, bows, and two-handed swords. Blue and white pennants fluttered below their lance points. The lead rider was a bull-sized Scot, wild and grim looking, wearing a blue Stewart tartan pinned with a gold sunburst. In Scotland you learned that plaid quickly. Queen Mary and King James were both Stewart clan chiefs.

"Kerrs, my Lady," said Alison looking more flushed than alarmed.

By now Anne was over-familiar with the border tribes. Blue and white were Kerr colors, the sunburst a Kerr badge, and these riders carried their lances on the left. "Kerr-handed." It mattered much to Anne what kind of Kerrs these were. She was on tolerably good terms with the Ferniehurst Kerrs — who had feuded with her husband Tom but always been polite to her. They had ridden off with her only once, showing utmost respect for "her ladyschip" while carrying her away to Ferniehurst.

In the midst of the pack she saw a preacher's blue serge coat, ringed by riders bearing tall Jedburgh axes with wicked round cutting edges. Seeing Jedburgh blades put the fear in Anne. These Kerrs could not be Ferniehurst Kerrs, because Ferniehurst was a feud with Jedburgh. They must follow Walter Kerr of Cessfort, Warden of the Middle March.

Anne took hold of Alison's wrist and backed into the crowd, biting down on her own lip to keep her English tongue from betraying her. If Cessford Kerrs recognized her she was fouled for sure. Laird Walter of Cessford had no use for Anne and "suchlike Inglis rabbels." Walter Kerr was allied with Elizabeth against his own Queen Mary. A fortnight before the English Earl of Sussex and Old John Foster had been through here, burning out the Teviotdale and searching for English fugitives; leaving these Scots naught to celebrate but barley spirits and blue-white skies. The parish kirk was burnt to the ground, its steeple thrown down on the dancing green. Pick and pry bar had finished what fire would not burn.

The Kerrs parted ranks for the preacher in blue serge. Tall and angular, he had a stern look and prophet sized beard under his plain black bonnet. Bloodshot eyes bulged at the crowd. "War in scripture does it say ye ar ta prance like proud Philistines an this the Laird's Day?"

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Jock Armstrong of the Syde stepped forward from the crowd. He had the sure swagger of a wolf who did not fear a hackbutt ball. His only visible protection was a blue and white ribbon in his bonnet. Kerrs and Armstrongs shared the same colors. Anne cursed his courage under her breath. Bravado would only draw attention.

"Ye lairdschip's most mistaken," said Jock, "these people prance like Scots. Any Kerr can tell ye Scots are too thick-footed to learn foreign steps; not fram a Frenchman nar even fram a Philistine." The Kerrs laughed at Jock's joke on their Scot neighbors.

Anne saw admiration shining in Alison's eyes. Some swinging steps and bold words made the curly-haired Armstrong a hero. Anne hoped that Jock got no one killed impressing serving girls and half drunk Scots.

The gaunt man in blue leaned forward on his mount, thundering down at the Armstrong. "Such Sabbath dancing is pagan witchery. Fram this Sabbath forward thar will be na such mummery — na dancing, na play-acting, na gaming, na sacred songs nar playing of pipes."

"The priest in these parts blesses piping an dancing," said Jock, pointing to a small shaven man tending the still-pot. "By act o' Parliament they need na other preacher."

"That man is known ta be a debauched papist, a highlander, an a drunkard." The minister growled like a baptized Turk. Anne knew acts of Parliament would not stay this man. He was backed by Kerrs, and most likely Elizabeth, which counted for more on the Borders than a dozen Scot's Parliaments.

"The man is a McNab," admitted Jock, "an all highlanders swig spirits like royal salmon; but he is our drunkard, an mumbles his mass na worse than most."

Anne could see the Cessford Kerrs smiling under their pot helms, hearing a market town preacher baited by an Armstrong. Rough border boys were eager to prance and play-act among the maids — on Sabbath day or any other. She guessed the Kerrs were here only because Walter Kerr of Cessford was at private war with Walter Scott of Beccleuch whose tenants were gathered on the green. Despite the good humor, Jock leaned dangerously hard on the ancient amity between Kerr and Armstrong. Anne drew Alison back, readying to run.

She saw the minister straighten in his saddle, addressing the crowd. "Any mass is an abomination, banned throughout the land. The Sabbath

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day wa nat meant fur work nar song, nar fur drinking yer heathen brew. On the Laird's Day the herdsman will nat sheer sheep, the miller nat grind corn. . . ." The Jedburgh minister rose higher in his stirrups, his face turning red, his fuse burning short. Anne pulled hard on Alison, prepared to shift for both of them. ". . . wife will nat work fur sale nar market, but fur husband alone."

Women jeered his sole excuse for Sabbath labor.

"Shut yer shameless mouths," he shouted. Eyes rolled in their sockets. He waved wildly to the Kerrs. "Break up this gathering. Send them an their sinful ways."

There was a rush to save the still-pot as people scattered and the mounted Kerrs began swinging lance butts. Anne hiked up her skirts and ran with the rest, holding hard to Alison. Jock could save himself. They fled straight for the village wood bordering the green. Kerrs knew better than to chase fleeing Scots into a wood, where dirk or dagger could undo an armored horseman. Anne almost dragged Alison, dodging between timbers, scrambling up the slope beyond. Now there would be no more Sabbath dancing, no Sunday football.

Crossing a swift burn and a steep cleugh, the two women emerged on a high moor thick with thorn and heather. From this treeless top Anne got a sweeping view of the Teviotdale: woods and shining water, meadows and ploughlands, farms newly burnt and blackened. She saw fat blackfaced sheep grazing in scattered clumps, and flocks of white-faced Cheviots cropping the grass together. Spring lambs wobbled about like fluffy clockwork toys with rose petal ears. From now until Teltane the Scots lived in these high sunlit sheilings with their flocks, coming down only for feast days and sabbaths.

"He wa wonderful my Lady," sighed the girl between breaths. Her red curls cupped a pretty peasant face.

"Who *wa* wonderful?" Anne asked, knowing the answer.

"Jock the Armstrang." The name came so ready, so willing. Anne could see Alison was all gone on the man. Spinning on her toes the girl relived what she had seen on the green. "He stood up ta a score of Kerrs an a haf-dozen Jedburgh axemen. Na ta mention a market town minister."

"There is more to being a man than bravery," sniffed Anne. She thought of her own foolish-brave husband Tom, sitting in a prison cell waiting for the ax. She wished Jock would add some sense to his courage.

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"Oh, he be man enough for any woman," said the girl.

Thinking that the young live beyond advice, Anne said nothing. By now they were deep in the sheilings. Ridges of sward and rough grass stretched every which way, and Anne was glad to have Alison leading.

"Ye did na dance wi us?" Alison gave her a timid, helpful glance.

"I am more used to French fast *galliards* than to your wild reels," Anne replied. "Though when I was your age, a low and impudent young man showed me a morris dance one May Day."

Anne had seen Alison dancing with Jock. Moving with the pipes they had made a pleasant couple, but it troubled Anne to see them together. She felt the burden of age and authority. Her handmaid was just gone fifteen, but she danced among grown men; bare feet twirling beneath her skirts, hands clasped behind her back, lips parted in pleasure. In Alison's light-footed happiness Anne saw sensual abandon, a girl giving all to the body.

As best Anne could tell these border Scots spent every spring Sabbath in drunken exaltation of the body. If not in dance then in games. Sabbath dances were followed by Sunday football. Every man and lad in the village made up the sides. Tubs of homebrewed heather beer marked the goals, and games ranged back and forth across the common. Alison and her girlfriends hopped and squealed on the sidelines, or lifted their skirts and ran in among the boys.

Alison said Anne had missed much living in such high station but, "Ye could learn our reels." Raising slim arms overhead, Alison tripped lightly through a step or two. Anne tried to follow, and tangled her feet on a tuft of grass. Catching her arm, Alison kept Anne from falling. Both women laughed. Not letting go, Alison led Anne through a few steps.

Then Anne put an end to it. "You can dance freely, but I have a husband in prison." Since the Armstrongs of Harlaw had betrayed her Tom, she had not felt long like dancing.

The serving girl kept hold of her, and Anne continued the walk arm in arm with Alison.

Not until she saw the long loch did Anne get her heading back. By then it was late afternoon and the water gleamed diverse colors; deep green in the the foreground, almost burgundy in the distance. Small stands of trees marked the start ofgreat Ettrick Wood. Sighting a black wolf trotting through a glen, Anne knew that Jock would be waiting to greet them.

Anne was living on a croft above the loch, in a stone cottage belonging

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to the Laird of Buccleuch. The Earl of Sussex had done his level best to burn the entire Teviotdale, but the most diligent arsonist will miss the odd croft and small farmstead. The cottage served as a shepherd's rest and laird's hunting lodge. When not slaughtering each other the border lairds were keen on killing small birds and animals. Now Buccleuch himself was being hunted by the English and the Kerr of Cessford, so he gave Anne the use of his lodging. Even an outlawed border laird could show courtesy to a lady.

The rough stone bothy was beamed with cleft oak and thatched with bracken. Open windows were shut with boards whenever the wind blew. The four stone walls belonged to the laird, but the roof and thatch of the bothy had been put on by Alison's mother. She had the right to take the roof with her if her laird turned her out. Anne had once owned many fine manors. With her husband she had held the castles of Warkworth, Alnwick, and Cockermouth. Still she had come to feel real fondness for this little mess of a house.

She found not just Jock, but a whole cottage full of unkempt country folk expecting to share Sunday dinner. These beggars were the best people in these parts. The priest McNab was there, with his wife. So were Crosers and Olivers, hungry for Good Mother Scott's stewed mutton. McNab offered up a short prayer in painful latin, then Jock said a Selkirk grace over the meat:

Some hae meat an canna eat,
An some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat
An so our Laird be thankit.

Anne stared at the sheep's flesh and prunes floating in fatty gravy. No one made a move to eat. An awkward silence hung over the mutton. Jock speared a plump sheep's tongue with his dirk, plopping it down on Anne's platter. "Yer ladyschip ates first," he said, handing her the dirk.

As delicately as she could, Anne took the dirk and started to carve her tongue. Her guests heaved hungry sighs and tore at the meat. No one bolts flesh better than Scots who had starved through the winter on black pudding — oatmeal mixed with blood bled live from breeding stock. They licked fingers with gusty delight, having no bread to sop the gravy.

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Their only table tools were the belt knives everyone carried, used to slice meat, spear tidbits, and break apart bones. They rapped the broken bones with the pommels to loosen the greasy marrow. Anne missed her forks and finger bowls, her acres of snow-white linen.

A countess, even a fugitive countess, counted for far more than any number of simple Scots or Crosers, but Anne actively enjoyed this wild company. Alison and her mother had come with the croft, but Anne had discovered her handmaid was a charming dancer, and her cook was a midwife and herbalist. Calling the older woman "Good Mother," simple Scots came to her for cures and advice — treating her as the lady of the house and Anne as some rare and fragile object.

She listened to the Scots debate the day's events. They considered the Jedburgh minister just a new manner of devil inflicted on them by the Kerrs. "The man war a weasel," said Alison's mother, "an a touch o' the swine fever would serve him nicely." A strong woman, she spoke her thoughts straight out. She dismissed the minister's strange views on the Sabbath as the sort of insanity that infected townspeople, "crushed ta-gather in thar narrow lanes, breathing naught but soot an unhealthy airs."

Anne said nothing. Her high station did not give Anne much sway over the Scots. She was a stranger. Worse than a stranger, she was English. She was no more a part of their day to day life than a Queen of far Cathay. They came and went, feeding and clothing her, expecting naught from her, neither payment nor opinion. If she had given advice, Anne suspected they would nod, smile, then forget she had spoken.

Beltane was all that mattered to them. They would go to kirk, but celebrate May Eve in the sheilings as they had always done, with dancing and fornication. Anne saw Alison give the Armstrang another available smile. Such plain youth and freedom made Anne feel her age and station.

She marveled at the priest's part in all this, sitting there with wife at his side, preparing to say mass at a pagan May Day, as if Pope and Archbishops barely existed. Was it ignorance, or knowing what his flock wanted? Once she had asked McNab why he had a wife. He had seemed shocked, saying priests in his parts had always married. Anne found it scandalously common for Scots to figure their descent from sainted priests and bishops. The very name McNab meant "son of the abbot," inherited from hereditary celtic abbots in the highlands. McNab limped through his latin mass, mixing in a language that Anne guessed was

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gaelic. Otherwise he fornicated freely, always seeming happy.

Her guests gone, Anne sat up with Jock. Alison hung on their talk as long as Jock was about. "Tis better to bend than break," said the Armstrong, assuming a philosophical air. He was a stranger also, from south of the Cheviots in Liddesdale, but everyone listened to him. All of them — not just Alison — knew he had the power. "We will go ta kirk. I itch ta hear what a real refarmed preacher has ta offer."

Anne said in the North of England they had reformed religion shoved down their throats, "and Northumberland swallowed more than her share."

Jock shook his head in sorrowful fashion. "The man's views on song an dance seem hard, but thar be a point ta having anly women at work an the Sabbath." He gave Anne a sly smile. "It would na be bad ta swig Kirk claret, while being served shortbread by ye lasses."

Anne smiled back. "Yes, but the Kirk will expect a week's worth of work out of you — no Sabbath's Eve drinking, no football on the Lord's day, no Holy Monday to recover from it, no feast days during the week." Half the Scots calendar seemed to be holy days, and Anne doubted there was a full week's work in the whole Armstrong clan.

"I admit the man shows na much promise."

Anne felt pensive. "I have an outright fear of him."

Jock took her hand with gentle concern. "I will na fool you lass, these are fearful times. In Liddesdale the Elliots, an even Armstrangs, are shining Queen Elizabeth's shillings in thar purses. We are hemmed in as long as Lennox holds the Hermitage, an the Inglis hold Hume an Fast Castle."

Anne had seen Sussex make a clean sweep through Teviotdale, taking or tearing down every keep where she might seek safety. Her sometimes friends, the Kerrs of Ferniehurst, had been scattered like Buccleuch and his Scots. Most of the Scot's Middle March was under the sway of Walter of Cessford and the English-leaning Earl of Lennox. Scotland was locked in its usual civil war and Anne looked to be on the losing side. She had to put her faith in Jock and heathens of his ilk. There was no one else beneath Heaven to trust.

Jock seemed to realize what a slim reed he was. Squeezing her arm he said, "Do na worry so much lass. Like the people say, May Day is a coming soon." He grinned at the girl, inviting Alison into the conspiracy to comfort Anne.

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"Before we ken twill be Beltane," said Alison — again the happy anticipation. "Things will be better cam summer."

Since autumn and the Rising in the North, Anne had lost her husband Tom, her titles, her castles, her manors, as well as the cause Northumberland had risen for. Now she shared a straw bed with a Scots serving girl, who longed for a wolfish stock thief. Could another season change luck so stubbornly bad? "What is so special about summer?"

"Do ye na know? The days are lang an the air is warm." Jock smiled at her, as if a countess could not know the simplest facts. "Settle doon an dance lass. Rome wa na burnt in a day."

> "And if these pleasures may thee move,
> Come live with me and be my love.
> The shepherd swains shall dance and sing
> For thy delight each May morning."
>
> — Christopher Marlowe 1564-1593

Sabbath Day an Night o' May

SIX MONTHS earlier Anne swore a savage oath to die before enduring the torment of another reformed service. Exile in Scotland had been a revelation, broadening and deepening her religion. She knew the all-embracing Church that baptized her, married her, raised her and restrained her would never rise again. Fleeing into Scotland forced her to find her faith in strange places. She was willing to think that she might find some shred of faith in the new Scot's Kirk. Burying her fear and foreboding, she went to Sabbath services with Jock and the upcountry Scots, showing they did not resist the Kirk outright.

They gathered down the dale in a new-style kirk, one of the few structures Sussex had left standing. Imperfectly lit and poorly vented, the narrow hall did not bring Anne any closer to God. Women and men were parted to prevent idle fornication in the back rows. Keeping to the rear, Anne could see nothing of the service but the pulpit, since everyone was warned not to kneel nor doff their hats, "which war signs o' papist reverence."

The Minister of Jedburgh did not preach the sermon, but gave the pulpit over to a skinny whey-faced graduate of Glasgow University, assur-

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ing them that this boy preacher was one of that "new breed of men — the cleanest, most knowledgeable an closest ta God." Anne admitted the boy cut a cleaner figure than McNab, the hedge priest who ate with his fingers.

The lad began by praising the dim and narrow kirk. In her womanly ignorance Anne had thought the place better fit to be a cattle barn, but she learned it was in no way the role of religion to encourage beauty. Stained glass should be shattered, tapestries torn down, icons and choir-stalls chopped to kindling. The old kirk by the green would remain as Sussex's moss troopers had left it, a ruined reminder of the bad old days. For that old church on the green had been the Synagogue of Satan, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Great Whore of Babylon with the Pope as prime pimp and harlot. The boy assured her, "We shall wage the war o' extermination that God commanded Israel ta execute against the Canaanites, upon them that wudd make the Roman Whore the immaculate spouse o' Christ." The world, and human hearts, "war polluted wi all manner o' spiritual indulgences," which the lad listed in shrill tones: "play-acting, masques, carnivals, ostentation, drunkenness, an the wanton conduct inspired by diabolical music that delights an bewitches the senses."

The congregation listened, neither delighted nor bewitched by the boy. When the preaching was done they shuffled out to where the Laird's table was spread with shortcake and claret. Jock whispered to her, "It war a lang wait far the wine. That reedy preacher lad would make a better man if he managed himself a bit'o wanton conduct."

Anne trod on his toe to quiet him. She wanted nothing but to leave, to be out in air and sunshine, though she hungered for some shortcake. Since coming to Scotland she had given up bread for barley porridge. Here the barest sort of pastry was as rare as spice cake in Northumberland.

The claret and cake came with another lesson. The Minister of Jedburgh announced that this shortbread and wine was most emphatically *not* the body and blood of Christ. "We deny that sleeveless old tale o' transubstantiation. As any reasoning man can see, these ar plain an natural substances, unchanged in thar nature, *nor ta be adored.*" He took a bite of his unadorable cake, then lifted his glass to wash the shortbread down with a mouthful of claret.

Anne saw Jock's grim smile, and started to say, "No."

Suddenly the minister was spitting and coughing, his face screwed up as though he were poisoned. His mouth opened and its bright red contents

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spilled out, dribbling down his chin, staining his blue serge coat. The claret had turned to blood in the Minister of Jedburgh's mouth.

Afterwards, safe again in the sheilings, Anne said, "Jock, you should not have done that."

Jock looked shocked. "Is it so bad ta see a man beaten wi his own rod? He got down an bended knee, beggin fur it wi his arrogance." Jock shook his head. "It war powerful poor claret ta begin wi."

Anne was neither convinced nor amused. She said the trick with the blood and the wine would only bring more trouble.

"An why blame me?" The Armstrong summoned a look of innocence, though his dark eyes danced. "For all we ken it may hae been Christ's very own blood in that claret."

So much for introducing reformed religion to a werewolf.

On May Eve in the Sheilings Anne might have supposed she was a world away from that Sabbath day. People came over the dark moor, holding pine pitch torches, chanting to the night:

We cam all so still
War our mother was,
As dew in April
That falleth an the grass.

Good Mother Scott sang in a voice clear as the night, calling on Mary the Maiden of May Eve:

O' the Maiden sing,
She that is makeless;
King o' all the Spring,
The babe at her breast.

The chanting line of Scots answered:

We cam all so still
Ta our Mother's bower,
As dew in April
That falleth an the flower.

* * *

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By an ancient standing stone Good Mother lit a bonfire with the torch she had carried. The Scots filed round the fire. As Alison passed she offered Anne a deep dipper of Jock Barley's Blood. Jock was with her, looking like the Lord of the Dane in his jacket trimmed with wolf fur and black cowhide breeches turned hair-side out. Stick antlers were tied to his head. Most of the men were in outlandish costume. The maids had flowers in their hair.

"Na one should be sober an Eve o' May," said the Armstrong. Anne thanked Alison for the dipper, but did not drink. The McNab was absent. Had he succumbed to an attack of scruples, or was the priest passed out under a bank? Singing and drinking had begun early in the warm April afternoon.

Never bashful, Jock took the priest's part, casting his torch into the bonfire and leaping into the center of the ring. Playing on his pipes, he danced a jig, joined by Alison and Good Mother Scott. The circle of Scots spiraled in toward the flames, torches turning their reel into a spinning wheel of fire, throwing tall shadows against the standing stone. Good Mother sang to the piping:

Mother an Maiden,
Was never none but she;
Well may such a lady
God's mother be.

The Scots roared back as they spiraled around the trio:

We cam all so gay;
War our Mother was,
As the dew in May
That riseth fram the grass.

Anne held herself back, but the light and movement washed over her, warming and exciting. She smelled the barley juice in the dipper, tempted by its cool intoxication. The Kirk would never drive song and dance from these people. Music was planted in them. They sang at work and danced at play. Shepherds piped lullabies to sheep. Women sang beautiful waulking songs as they fulled their cloth.

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Anne took a drink, telling herself this rite was really neither pagan nor Christian. The spiral dance went deeper, an ancient path of death and rebirth traced by bodies, into the womb and out again. She understood that the Scots danced to real changes in their lives. They danced away winter, danced away despair. They put black pudding and cold starvation behind them. The days *were* getting warmer. From now until Teltane they could live in the high sheilings, and rebuild the winter homes Sussex had burnt.

Sweat gleamed on flushed faces hungry for life. War and raid were forgotten for a night. Warmed by liquor and fire, women hiked their skirts up higher. Men tossed off shirts and cloaks. Anne saw Jock kick off his hairy black breeches and prance half naked with Alison in shameless excitation. Flustered but unable to look away, Anne brought the dipper to her mouth and drank more of the malt liquor.

Floating in her head was the rhyme her French tutor taught her, about the witches' dance under the arches of the bridge at Avignon: "*Sous le pont d'Avignon, on y dance tout en round*" — see them dancing round and round.

The spiral drew tighter, but Anne resisted. She would not be drawn into the dance. Over the heads she saw Jock's antlers and Alison's red cap of curls. Couples flashed past her naked. By ancient custom there were no marriage bonds on May Night. Breasts, thighs, limbs, and buttocks gleamed in the firelight. Dark groins pulsed to Jock's piping. The music and madness climbed to a crescendo. With a chorus of screams people threw their torches to the fire and ran into the night.

Anne stood stunned, gripping her empty dipper. The spiral was gone. So were Jock and Alison, and Good Mother Scott. Children dashed about before the fire. Crones crooned in a circle, and old gaffers gathered around the barrel of barley brew; but the dancers were off in the darkness, save for a few stretched out in a stupor. From that darkness came overloud laughter and women's squeals.

She set aside her dipper and knelt down to pray. No running off into the night for her. Jock was no doubt busy with Alison. She assumed he would hardly mind if she joined them — Jock was more broad-minded when it came to women — but how would she ever face her handmaid in the morning? Laying down on the moor, to writhe naked under the same man was bound to be a rather leveling. She was a married woman, a

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Christian countess mind you, not some shepherd lass.

Kneeling before the bonfire, Anne attempted to address God. It *war na* easy, as the Scots would say. She missed the mass McNab had promised. Christ's image came to her, but her Lord's bearded face kept grinning. His crown of thorns sprouted antlers. So she spoke to Mary instead, to her Mary, who talked to her and had come to her on Christmas Day. Her Mary of the Doves, Mary of the May. She did not pray for herself, but asked first for her husband in his dungeon cell, praying Tom might be freed. Then she asked what Mary needed of her.

Anne of Northumberland asked, and Mary of the May answered. The bonfire roared upward, becoming a living blossom reaching for heaven. Anne stared into the burning flower. In the hottest part of the firey rose the Maiden appeared cloaked in smoke. Mary neither winced nor cried out; her face stayed calm and cool as she beckoned to Anne and sang:

Ye cam all so gay
Ta yer Mother's bower,
As the dew in May
That riseth fram the flower.

The maiden cast off her cloak of smoke, like a witch's smock consumed by burning. Then like a witch she twisted naked amid the flames that dared not scorch her. *"Come dance Anne, an call my name. Ye are the kindling, an I am the flame."*

Standing up, Anne was struck by searing heat. How could Mary call for her from burning so cruel, from fire so bright? She stepped forward. The heat forced her back to her knees. "Please, I am but flesh, I cannot come to you through fire and pain."

Whirling, twirling, pulling taut, the fire maiden danced and sang, her face both sad and gay. *"Ye ar the tinder; I am the flame. Come ta the dance. Come, call my name."*

"Mary." Anne struggled to rise, but the heat pressed her down. Sweat beaded on her body. Sparks singed her hair and dress. The fire maiden flickered, faded, her singing dying on the night wind. *"Do na deny me. Do nat fight the fire."*

Fearful screams came out of the blackness, followed by the beat of iron shod hoofs on the tops. Anne's head snapped hard about. Blinded by

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firelight, she could see nothing in the night, but the Scots were up and running. The sober seized the drunk and scattered from the fire. An old woman ran shrieking past Anne, yelling that Kerrs were coming.

It could have been Kerrs coming over the moor, or Sussex, or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse arriving late to the dance. Anne did not sit waiting to see. Leaping up she dashed into the night at the heels of the country folk. Frightened Scots will outrun anyone. Anne could not have caught them on flat ground at full noon. Over black and broken moor she had not a hope of keeping up, but she blundered on, doing her best to keep her back to the hoofbeats and the fire.

Footing vanished beneath her. Falling straight into a gully, she rolled down a stony slope, scraping her shoulder, hitting hard against the far side. Hoofbeats thundered closer, engulfing her. Chaos filled the night. A horse flashed overhead, showering her with dirt and stones, hiding the stars for a heartbeat. Another mount crashed down the cleugh bank a few yards from her. She heard a Scot's curse. The horse righted itself, mounting the bank in clatter and a cloud of dust — then was gone.

Hoofbeats faded and the tops grew strangely still. Uncanny calm settled over Eve o' May, eerie in its completeness. Lying, nursing her shoulder, staring at cold stars, Anne strained to hear things. Nothing. Afraid to stay where riders had come already, she crawled along the cleugh searching for a hole or high bank to hide her. Before going far through the bracken she heard a noise close behind her.

Anne froze. She was sure of the sound, not a hoofbeat but softer. A big beast was padding up gully. Digging her nails into the dirt she peered over her hurt shoulder. Out of the night came the dog-like pant of a wolf. She watched the sinuous dark body separate from deeper shadows. Snout down, the beast came on in silence. Glittering eyes and teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

Big as the devil and black as sin the wolf trotted right up to her. She could feel his bulk and hot breath. Anne managed to open her mouth and croak softly, "Jock, is that you? God, I hope it is you."

The wolf did not answer. Baring white fangs he took firm hold of her arm, then started to pull. The animal outweighed her but his pull was gentle.

"Jock, it is a grown woman you are chewing now. I can crawl on my own."

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With a last tug the wolf let go her arm and turned back the way it had come. Anne followed, scraping her knees on stone and earth in an effort to keep up.

Smelling horses ahead Anne hesitated. She heard them snorting in the damp. There was movement in the blackness. Rising on his hind legs the wolf grew taller and paler, becoming erect, then human. Jock stood before her, wearing nothing but his fur trimmed jacket and a whiskey addled grin.

Anne stood up, not desiring to kneel before a man naked from the waist down. Standing upright she saw two horses and a small pale mound between them. The white mound was Alison wearing a torn shift. The girl lay curled in trusting sleep, heels tucked under bare thighs, and one thumb touched her lips. Her free hand clasped torn shift to tender breasts.

"Has she been harmed?" Anger made her words louder and sharper than Anne had intended. She lifted the limp girl by the shoulders, letting Alison's head loll against her shoulder. Closed lashes looked soft as a child's.

"Asleep," said Jock. "The drink, the dancing, an the night war much far her. Lasses will go out like this, an ye canna get them up far nothing befar morning. While the spell lasts, she is wi the Mother."

"How many young girls have you had this problem with?"

"Tis not my first Night o' May." With a low laugh Jock swung into the saddle and bent his arms down for the girl.

Alison had settled deep into her lap, and Anne was loath to hand her over to the man. Struggling to her feet, she found her sturdy handmaid impossible to carry. She could not mount her horse, so she passed her warm burden up to the Armstrong.

As she mounted, Anne whispered, "Where did you get these ponies?" Her horse was a border hobby, small and active. She had to hold tight on the reins, tucking her knees against the beast's belly just to keep her seat and get some control.

"They ar in the way o' a loan," replied the werewolf. "A few of the fools dismounted. It is na easy task ta picket horses in dark o' night an a treeless moor. Not fur Jedburgh men unused ta the sheilings. I took thar burden fram them. Men that canna care far horses are safer afoot."

Anne knew that Jock abided by the border philosophy that "the beasts war na made by man, nar war the fields that feed them." All men's claims to property were, alas, so temporary. He had told her plainly, "I steal stock

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fram my neighbor when I am in need, and expeckit my neighbor to steal fram me," which was as close as the Borders came to the Golden Rule.

She saw silver-gray waste and black twisted bracken, and heard the clop of hobby hoofs on moss and moor. Every so often they would stop, lean, and listen. Horses' ears twitched in the dark. Anne heard night birds and the eldritch whistle of wind on the moor. When the weight of silence grew too oppressive they would move on again.

"Things might hae gone farther an fared worse," said Jock. Riding with his buttocks and hairy legs exposed, he did not seem to feel the night.

Fear no longer kept Anne at full tension. Taut limbs turned cold and tired. She drew even with Jock to look at Alison. The girl was slumped against Jock's chest, head resting on his shoulder. Bare limbs hung limp, the torn shift hardly covering her. Anne took off her shawl and wrapped it awkwardly around the sleeping girl. Alison stirred, murmured, then went back to sleep.

"In Mother's arms," Jock laughed. "Ye doona need ta worry, Teviotdale lasses ar tough."

"That is no reason to treat her roughly," said Anne.

"Ye ken I wa rough wi her?"

"I do not know how you were with her, nor do I care to know. No girl needs to be filled with spirit brew and dragged out onto the moors."

"The barley juice wa just twice distilled — na the Stop-Yer-Breath whisky that they brew an the Isles. As fur draggin, the girl came runnin."

After a silence Jock spoke softly. "I ken thar is a hardness between us Anne that I wouldna have. Thar ar na marriage vows on May Eve. I may speak plain, as though ye were just a maid I fancied. If ye had danced wi us and then come runnin I would hae been a happy man."

"No doubt." She thanked Mary it was so dark. Anne had long imagined this conversation coming, never expecting it at night upon the moor, over the head of a sleeping girl.

"Ye are na foolish lass. Ye ken that if ye would whistle I would come. Ye consider yerself very much married. I respekit that, but still wish ye war a bit less wed."

"Marriage is not a matter of more or less for me," she said. Tom was in prison. It shamed her to even speak of adultery with an antlered satyr so plainly eager for fornication. "Neither law nor scripture put loopholes in my marriage vows."

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"Thar is little law in these dales, as yer ladyschip may hae noted. Since the Kirk refarmed I hae read parts o' scripture myself, and found God's words fascinating. Fram Abraham ta Solomon the Children o' God war never much confined by marriage. In places scripture says plainly what a man should do with a pleasing maid."

"That is the danger of letting every man peruse the Bible, picking and choosing his favorite parts," she said. "It lowers scripture to a common level, even to the level of the loins."

"I am na asking ye to lower yer scripture, nar even ta raise yer skirt. I am only saying that fear o' hell an hanging doona bind border men much. An Armstrang must find his own honor, or he will hae na honor at all."

"And you have found yours?" It exasperated Anne to hear him cloak his romantic escapades in chivalry.

"Enough honor ta not be rough with women, but give them what they want. Ye hae wanted na part o' me. I hae respekited that. Now this lass. . . ."

He stopped speaking, shushing Anne when she asked why. His nostrils flared. She knew his wolf's ears were keener than hers, perhaps his nose was too. "Thar coming," he growled.

"Who is coming?"

"Do ye wan ta wait an see?"

Anne heard it now, low and far off, the up and down drumming of horses hoofs on the tops, the irregular ring of metal on metal. Both grew louder. Only armored men coming on horseback made those sounds.

Kicking their ponies they plunged into flight. With nowhere to go but away, Anne gave her hobby his head. Clinging tight to the mane, Anne let her mount control their careening path. Jock's hobby, carrying double, fell behind hers. Reining in, she let him catch up, and caught her first sight of pursuit. A dim, indistinct mass drifted in their wake, small steel slivers winking above it — riders bearing lances in the moonlight.

Off again, Anne's eyes could hardly keep up with their flight. Obstacles hurtled past so fast they were gone before she saw them. Jock and Alison dropped back. Anne started to rein in again. That small slowing saved her. Her hobby hit a hole, and Anne flew forward over her horse's head, doing wild Catherine Wheels across the dark landscape.

When sense and breath returned she was lying on her belly, looking back at her horse. Bellowing in pain and fear the pony kept trying to rise, and kept falling on the same bent foreleg.

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Jock stood over the white form of Alison, the gleaming blade in his hand.

Jock came thundering up, leaped from his saddle, and skidded to a stop with Alison slung over one shoulder. His free hand offered Anne the reins. "Go," he yelled, "this pony is fagged. He will na keep ahead carrying double."

"But what about you and her? We need another horse."

"Thar is na time ta get one. Na time ta argue." The Armstrong set Alison down on a grass clump, then lifted Anne into his empty saddle. Alison lay on the ground, looking half awake and bewildered.

"Give me the girl," Anne shouted, arms outstretched. Frightened as she was, she would not leave her handmaid to face the riders alone. Jock jerked the knife from her belt and slashed at the hobby's rump.

A burst of terror and the pony was off, carrying her away. Clinging half on the horse Anne managed one look back. Her former mount was a struggling mass, still rising and falling in agony. Jock stood over the white form of Alison, the gleaming blade in his hand. Behind them came the armored riders, closer now, hurtling forward.

Plunging down slopes and over gullies at worse than reckless speed, Anne fought for control. She started to turn the hobby's head. Then her mount was off again, a black snarling wolf snapping at his fetlocks. She did not need to ask if this was Jock. He drove the hobby like a dog drives sheep, sprinting ahead to check the way, then doubling back to spur the horse on. Anne seized handfuls of mane and hung tight. Pounded by the mad gallop, her body shook with sobs, crying for the girl lying back on the cold black moor.

Jock dropped back. Anne took that chance to seize the reins and slow the pony to a sane gait. The wolf came trotting up again, tongue hanging loose, panting sharp puffs of mist. He made no more moves to encourage the horse. Anne guessed that their pursuers must have fallen behind, or found something to busy them.

She was too filled with anguish to speak, thinking of Alison lying alone. She wanted Jock to take man's form and tell her he had performed some miracle, some magic to hide the girl, but she dared not ask — afraid of hearing different.

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Burdened by guilt Anne slipped to the ground and started walking her horse, picking her way by the first light of May. Plodding on tired feet she saw stars fade and sky lighten. The long loch shimmered molten silver in the gray of morning. That insane gallop had carried her back to her borrowed croft. The wolf ran sniffing up the packed earth path to the cottage.

The dry stone stood gray on gray, windows staring like hollow sockets. No smoke climbed from the mud and stick chimney. Anne knew no one could be here to greet them. They had come too far too fast for that. Looking down she saw dark stains on her hands and on her dress hem, blood smeared from her horse's flank. Anne dreaded what had to come next. Jock would assume his human form and she would have to ask him what had happened to her handmaid. He would have to answer that she had been left for the Jedburgh riders to find.

Growling a warning, the wolf stopped halfway. Anne froze, wondering what was wrong. Yelling riders bolted out of the deep gully that ran along the rear of the croft. Smoke blossomed and shots rent the air. Anne's pony squealed in pain and terror, then crumpled. Scared out of her seven senses, Anne dropped her reins and ran.

Hoofs thundered up behind her. Gloved hands seized her shoulders. Caught between two riders, with a mailed arm about her middle, she felt her feet still running in midair. Hackbutts banged next to her, throwing sparks and smoke at Jock. Anne knew they had not a chance of hitting the coal black wolf that only silver would touch. Looking up as she struggled, she saw a bearded face grinning beneath a pot helm.

Then came blackness. Someone had thrown a cloak over her head and body. Folds closed as a cord tightened about her waist. Through the thick fabric she could feel hard armor, and the rough rider who had her. In the darkness she heard Scot's accents amused by her plight.

"I hae brought ye ta the ring, so hop dance if ye can."
— Wallace's speech to the Scot's schiltrons before the battle of Falkirk on Mary Magdalene's Day.

* * *

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One Step, Two Step

ANNE'S CELL had no window, just a tall vertical slit in the outer wall. There was a stone step beneath the slit and a small horizontal slot at shoulder height, where a man could rest a crossbow or hackbutt to fire outward and to the sides. Barely a hand's breadth wide, this long hollow cross let in her only air and light. Anne dragged her straw mattress across the wooden floor, so she could lie looking out of the keep, over the peaked roofs of Jedburgh to the green fields beyond.

It was the fields and sky that drew her. She did not care to look down on crowded houses and crooked streets. Anne had never lived much in towns, hating London and York. They were filled with awful smells and worse diseases. As a countess she had never liked townsmen either, who came bowing, scraping and trying to sell her things, sneering when they thought she would not see. She far preferred to see peasants, plain faced Jacks and Janes who put food on her table, cared for her horses, sang to her at Christmas time, and came hat in hand when they were in need.

Anne could imagine what went on in those houses. Down there sat the burghers of Jedburgh at the heads of their plank tables in their plain russet doublets, proud of their glazed windows, eating their corn fed goose off pewter plates. Each was a little laird in his house, lording over women and apprenticed boys. The whole greedy lot had groveled before the Earl of Sussex, just as they used to grovel for her Tom. The swath of blackened keeps and burnt villages that swept down the Teviotdale stopped abruptly at Jedburgh. Calculating burghers had bought peace with Sussex by handing over English rebels and turning their coats on fellow Scots. Right now she guessed they were haggling over her, trying to squeeze out the odd shilling before giving her over to Royal England.

Anne did not envy their mean comfort and smug security, nor their blood money. She did not envy their corn fed goose and cabbage. The canny burghers were not feeding her goose and cabbage; she got nettle soup with lumps of lard and gristle. Simple English bread and clean water would be welcome when it came. Short rations were a false economy as far as Anne was concerned. If the good burghers kept her on this diet she should be able to slide sideways through the crack in the stone, drop the thirty feet to the dry moat, scale the far wall and make her escape. Then they would be out her reward.

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She passed time reliving banquets and making up meals in her head, imagining meats gilded with egg yolks and saffron; veal, rabbit, partridge, eel, pike and peacock, all ringed by cheeses and cherries. Her imagination amused her, but did not feed her.

It was far less amusing to think about what was likely to happen. She expected to exchange this cell for an English one; then her fate would be with Elizabeth. Tom was in some other Scot's cell, facing the traitor's ax or the felon's rope as soon as Elizabeth and the Earl of Lennox agreed on his price. In that one way her cell was liberating. She was free to think about Jock without being disloyal to Tom. She and Tom were on equal terms now. Nor need she worry about committing some indiscretion with the handsome Scot. Walled away from temptation she could smile at the thought of Jock and his good hearted thievery. How sorry never to see him again.

Without warning the oak door swung open. All smiles ceased. The Minister of Jedburgh came in, tall and grim in gray broadcloth, followed by a slight man with thick spectacles and an educated manner. Guards came too, carrying a large leather case that clanked when they set it down.

Anne greeted the Guard Captain who had always been polite. One of his thick headed villains mumbled, "She ar far sure a witch, speakin so strange." The Captain reprimanded his man. "If that war so than Hume an Fast Castle are garrisoned by witches, because what she speaks is only English." Her Guard Captain bowed and apologized.

Anne accepted his apology, with forced good humor. She had heard the word any woman in prison dreaded — *witch*. That it had been spoken by a oafish clod with whey for brains did not make her feel one whit safer. Morons like him have few original thoughts, speaking mainly what every-man is thinking. Did they dare accuse her?

The minister began by introducing himself and his companion in his straightforward fashion. "Me ye must know well. This is Doctor Gessler fram over the sea. He has spent some years in yer country."

Doffing his cap and showing his thinning hair, Gessler said he was born in Basel but lived mostly in Geneva and Germany. He spoke English well. "I stayed in London and Essex, but this is my first trip north. Is yours a North Country accent? Speech is a specialty of mine."

She said yes, she was the Countess of Northumberland, though she knew she had only a speaking claim to that title.

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"I passed through Northumberland," said Gessler, "a very pretty place, warm and green in this spring weather." Both Anne and the little man smiled. Neither needed to mention that Northumberland was paradise compared to the stark poverty and cold comforts of Scotland.

The minister stopped this small pleasantness. "We did na come ta discuss the climate, but this woman's crimes."

Anne gave him her first bit of attention. "I have committed no crimes in Scotland. You have no right to try or even accuse an English noblewoman. I rebelled against my Queen, but that is for Elizabeth to judge." Her station and nationality were by far her best defenses.

Gessler looked to the minister. "Are you satisfied with this answer?"

"I am most certainly na satisfied," said the minister. "I doubt that she is any more a countess than I am, nor do I care if she rebelled against the Inglis strumpet. As she said, that is na a crime in Scotland."

Gessler took off his glasses, polished them with a bit of blue satin, then put them back on and turned to Anne. "Since the minister is not satisfied with your answers we must start the first step."

"First step?" Anne looked the little man over trying to divine his meaning.

"Yes," said Gessler. "I am a Doctor of Truth. Science has devised a method of separating truth from the most stubborn falsehood. We begin by establishing an atmosphere of honesty. Nothing I tell you will ever be a lie. The first step consists of showing the instruments. They may not be used until the third step."

"What instruments?" Anne moved to where her straw pallet was pushed against the wall.

"It is well you ask," said Gessler, dragging the leather case across the floor to where she stood. Anne watched him undo the latches and release the belts that bound the case. "These are the instruments." Gessler produced a pair of pincers with a short cord attached, so their pointed tips could be tied down. "Pincers."

Next to the sharp pincers he put out half a dozen thumb-sized vises. "Gresillons."

"We call tham pennywinkis," said the minister.

Aghast, Anne watched the little man lay out his terrible collection, like a demented tinker displaying his wares. Nails, needles, and iron beaded cords followed. She scrambled onto her mattress, backing against

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the hollow cross carved in the stone, jerking her legs up onto the straw, trying to get her limbs as far as possible from those bits of black iron. Each was designed to put cold unyielding pressure on feeling flesh.

"Lady, you need not worry in the least," said Gessler. "I told you this is only the showing. These cannot be used until the third step. Think of it as a ladder. You are safe on the first rung, and never need to climb a step higher."

"Get them away from me." Anne could feel the free air from outside chilling her spine. "You have no right."

"And the *boot*," said Gessler, clanking down the largest piece, an iron stock that fitted over the foot and calf, made to be tightened with screws and wedges. Then he knelt beside her. "You stand safe on the first step, as long as you give us the truth."

"I am telling the truth," she yelled it though they were only a pace away. "I am Countess of Northumberland. Alive and whole, I am worth a ransom."

The Minister of Jedburgh found this amusing. "In Scotland ye will find that the laws ar mar level. High station will na save ye. Last year Lord Lyon, King o' Arms, wa burnt fur being a witch. He was a man an a Scot. Ye ar neither."

Gessler nodded. "I have heard all this before. I have heard women swear they were pregnant, possessed, nuns, even Queens of the May. None of those are important. None are why you are here."

"Why am I here? What do you want me to say?" The stone cell had seemed merely confining, now it walled off the whole sane cosmos.

"You will know what you have done, better than we," said Gessler. "You need only match my honesty. I told you truly that these instruments will not be used at the first step. I tell you just as truly that they will be used, *on you*, at the third step, if you are not honest with us."

"I have done nothing wrong." Anne knew she had done much that was wrong, but not the wrongs they wanted to hear about. She had desired Jock. She had left Alison alone on the moor.

The minister eyed her. "Ta start ye might admit that ye are a papist."

"I was raised in that religion." Anne tried to control her voice. "I think that there is Mary in everywoman and Christ in everyman, in the Pope as well as in you." That last was half defiance, and only half truth. Anne imagined that the Minister of Jedburgh and the man beside him would do middling well as devils.

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"That statement has a heathen smell," said the minister. "Yer own Pope in Rome has burned people fur less."

"Then have my case referred to Rome," said Anne, "save yourself the price of firewood."

The minister snorted, calling for clerk and parchment. In the clerk's presence Anne repeated her protestations. The clerk dutifully took them down and left. Anne was not the least reassured.

Gessler looked up at the minister. "Are you satisfied."

"Na, I am nat."

The torturer got up, packing away his tools. "Then we are at the second step." Both men left.

At first Anne could barely believe they would walk away. She feared they would start using those ugly pieces of iron on her. Time wore on her, and she saw why they were making her wait. Anger and indignation dissolved into gnawing, relentless horror. She did not even know what the second step was, but already she wished she were back at step one.

Gessler had taken firm control of her daydreaming. Racking her mind, she tried to imagine what she could say to satisfy them. They did not care that she was a countess. They were not counting the silver she was worth. That alone was shockingly insane. Driving the dance and devil out of Teviotdale meant more to this minister than toadying up to Sussex and Elizabeth.

What could she say? She knew how these trials went. They did not have a firm accusation or they would have confronted her with it. They must guess she had been out at Eve o' May. They had come to the rites, and to her cottage. Could she claim to be an unwitting observer — nothing like a participant? No, she told herself, *do not dare.* A single admission would set her on a slippery slope above the flames. The least weak word and they would torture her until she confessed to being fully a witch. She could admit absolutely nothing. Better to be tortured than burnt. A ghastly pair of choices.

She watched her door and waited. The bolt slid back. She braced herself. The heavy oak door swung inward, and Alison entered.

Anne felt a flood of relief at seeing the girl she had abandoned. Alison was alive. The girl held her head down, hair falling over her eyes, one hand twisting her white shift. Her gaze avoided Anne, but Anne could understand. She called softly, and her handmaid shuffled awkwardly forward.

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Anne felt more guilt, seeing a girl so naturally graceful stumbling in her presence. "I am sorry Alison, oh so sorry," was all she could think to say.

Looking up, confusion on her face, the girl started crying. Sobbing, she threw herself in Anne's lap saying over and again that she was sorry, too. She clung to Anne with one hand, still twisting her shift with the other.

Drawing her in, Anne said her handmaid had nothing to be sorry for.

"Na," said the girl, her voice falling so low that Anne could hardly hear. "I hae done bad, but I could na name my mother."

"You have not done bad." Anne felt foolish, correcting her as though they were still truly maid and mistress.

"I had to give tham names," sobbed the girl, "an I could na name my mother."

"Of course." She stroked her handmaid's hair.

"I named Jock."

"Jock can care for himself," better by far than we have done, thought Anne. She wished Gessler would show his wares to the werewolf. Jock would rip the little man's horrid heart and lungs out, with no more remorse than a hungry wolf.

"I named ye." The girl curled tighter, hiding her head in Anne's breast.

Anne knew what was coming, and patted the girl. Among the border Scots the guest was sacred, but still a stranger. The pull of blood was stronger. Besides, she and Jock had left Alison for the riders to find. How horrible it must have been to fall asleep on Eve o' May and awake in Jedburgh gaol. How could someone so young stand up to the threat of torture? Anne would have to hurt for all of them. She was the one running from judgment. Her tenants in England had been beaten and hung for rising up alongside her. She would not have more people suffering for her in Scotland.

"But I named ye as a witch."

"It does not matter," said Anne, though Alison had brought her a frightful step closer to the fire. They had a hard accusation. A witness. In law it was now her word against Alison's. Not a countess against a serving girl, but a suspected witch against her accuser. Anne's only defense was the strength of her denial.

"Will Jock come far us?" asked Alison. "The man is a wonder."

"A knight *sans peur et sans reproche.*" Anne said it softly, with feeling.

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It was silly to face pain and death still mad at Jock. Better to admit her admiration.

"Wat wa that?" French had confused her handmaid. Anne stroked Alison again. "Without fear and without blame. He will come for us if he can." The werewolf did not have a dog's chance of entering a stone keep guarded by a garrison of Jedburgh axemen, and ringed by a hostile town; *but why tell Alison that!*

The heavy door swung open. Gessler entered along with the Minister of Jedburgh and a pair of axemen. Alison shrank deeper into Anne's arms, hiding her face from the men.

"The second step," said Gessler, "is for you to see what the instruments do."

"Get away from us," yelled Anne.

He signaled to the guards. "Lift up the girl."

Grounding their axes the guards used their free hands to tear Alison away from Anne. Gessler walked around to stand between the two women. He lifted the front of the girl's shift.

Anne stuck her fist in her mouth, to keep from gagging or crying out. She saw toes reduced to mangled stubs, black with blood.

"Show your hands," commanded Gessler. Alison would not show the hand she had kept hidden in her shift. Gessler took the girl's wrist, trying to force her. Anne turned away, clamping her own fists over her eyes. She could only remember how graceful in the dance the girl's body had been. She did not need to see the hand.

Eyes shut, she heard Gessler stalk around to stand in front of her. "The second step is totally for your benefit, to show what the instruments will do. Many will not believe until they see the work." He sounded astounded by the depths of human folly.

> "We have piped unto you, and you have not danced. . . ."
>
> — Saint Matthew xi, 17

* * *

The Ringless Plum

After midnight Anne was awakened for the third step, hands in heavy gauntlets shaking her out of sound sleep. Gray men in quilted jackets

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dragged her to her feet, guiding her out of her cell, into a waking nightmare. Blinded by sputtering torches, stinging smoke, Anne stumbled down spiraling stairs. Blackness danced ahead of her, beyond the torchlight. Her guards would not meet her gaze. That alone told where she was being taken. Exhaustion stripped her defenses, exposing her to the terrors of the night and the fears of what was coming.

With each step she tried to steel herself. Her life had come full circle. When she rose up against her Queen she had stepped into a war. Not a war of armies, but a war of peoples, fought in prison cells and at the execution block. She had ridden behind the banners, seen the men into battle, ridden in retreat; now it was her hour for battle, unarmed, not on a fair field but in a tower basement. Say nothing, or die at the stake.

Down they led her, to the dank bottom of the keep. Heavy, moldy air made her feel the full weight of the sweating stones above her. In the bottommost grain cellar they took her to a wooden trap in the flagstone floor. Her guards heaved back the heavy trap and told her to descend.

Rotted stairs disappeared into a wet black hole reeking of smoke and earth. The axemen prodded her. A draft of night air blew in her face from stone vents. By the light of tapers and a glowing bucket of coals she saw Gessler and the minister waiting below. If these men were devils, she was seeing into their little private hell.

Halfway down she stopped. Back and forth, half in shadow, half in light, a body swung from the ceiling. A man's nude body hung at a sickening angle. Hands were bound behind him, suspended by straps at the wrists, wrenching his arms all the way back in their sockets. Between twisted shoulders lolled a shining stubbled head. Anne recognized the highland priest McNab. Her hands locked on the wood rail, and she tried to back out of the pit. The press of men forced her down. Tearing her gaze off the obscenely tortured flesh, she felt her way to the bottom of the stairs.

She stood there shaking, eyes down, seeing nothing but the packed black earth at her feet. Under her breath she asked for Mary, over and over again. Mary, please do not make me face this alone.

Someone strode around behind her, grabbed her gown and ripped the back open. She clutched at the front, holding it tight to her breasts, terrified they would strip her as naked as McNab.

"Sit her in the chair," said Gessler's voice.

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The guards bore her backwards, toward a skeletal iron chair with leather straps, looking bare and horrible in the half-light. The metal seat felt so frigid she feared her naked back and hips would adhere to it. They buckled the straps around her wrists, waist, and ankles. Then Gessler motioned for the guards to leave. Anne shut her eyes tight as she could, feeling only the cold hard chair and the leather restraints. God, this devil plans something so horrible that he does not want his minions to bear witness.

"This is the Witch's Chair," said Gessler. She heard him drag the coal bucket across the dirt. With a bang, he opened a metal door beneath her seat. "Coals and tinder go in there. The fire can be stoked as hot as is needed."

Oh Mary, help me for I am alone, and must not answer.

"You have seen the boot before." She felt them clap the heavy metal stock about her left foot and calf.

Dear Mary, help me. Keep me from speaking.

Someone kicked a wedge into the boot, locking her leg in place, scraping her shin and cruelly pinching her calf. She gasped between her teeth, but did not cry nor speak. Better to endure this than be burned alive.

"We work with the small joints first," said Gessler, taking her foot, forcing a pennywinkis onto her toe. She felt the screw grate as he twisted it. Metal sank into her toe. Turning her head, she bit into her bare shoulder to confuse the pain. In the blackness behind her eyelids Anne held her breath, trying to force herself to faint. She needed numbing unconsciousness. Ignorant lungs screamed for breath. Her body fought to breathe and feel.

They moved the pennywinkis to another toe, and tightened it again. The second toe broke. Air shrieked out of her.

"Good," said Gessler. "Now we have broken the silence. Honest answers can save you more pain."

She sat there, held up by the straps, her chest heaving. "I am not a witch. If I were would I not be cursing you?"

"This is no disputation," said Gessler. "Arguments will not help you, only honest truth." He moved to another toe.

"Honest?" Sickened, she could feel hysteria rising in her. "You have no notion what the word means."

"See the truth of what is happening to you," Gessler grabbed her

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hair and tried to force her head forward to make her look at her foot.

She kept her eyes shut, seeing her foot as it had been, not as it felt. They may maim me, but they may not burn me.

There was a pause in the darkness, then Gessler said softly, "Anne, is it the burning that you fear?"

Who would not fear burning? She felt him kneel at her side. "Is it fear of the witch's fire that keeps you from answering?" There was understanding in his voice.

Anne ran her tongue over her lips, then brought her teeth together to keep from talking. Words would only betray her into the flames. There was a clang beneath her. She heard tinder loaded into the fire box. A shovel grated. Her left felt the heat of coals being put atop the kindling.

She smelled smoke. "Here is your fire," said Gessler, "only the truth will quench it."

Heaving and sweating, she tried to lift her thighs off the hot metal, straps pulled her back. Oh Mary, is this my fire?

A bell-like voice inside her rang. "*Anne, da nat fight the fire. Ye are the tinder; I am the flame.*"

How can I not fight? It hurts so horribly.

Mary danced in the redness of pain. "*Da na deny me.*"

"I will admit it," Anne gasped.

"Admit what?" Gessler stepped to her side.

"I am a witch." Searing metal made her scream it.

"Amen, truth at last." Anne recognized the minister's voice.

"God I have said it, please the fire."

Gessler splashed water over her and into the fire box. "There, is the truth not better. Call the clerk."

She opened her eyes. Steam rose from the metal. She saw McNab as a grotesque crucifix, blurred by her tears. She looked down, staring into the sodden folds of shift in her lap, waiting for the clerk.

Mary, is it true? Must I be a witch? My body can bear no other answer. She felt a desperate fearlessness. The worst had come. She had condemned herself to burning.

The clerk was a boy looking as shaken as she was. When she lifted her gaze his parchment rattled. She confessed again for this boy's benefit, so he could put it down on paper.

"As a witch, what crimes have you committed?"

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She looked back into her lap. "I said I was a witch, is that not crime enough?"

"We must know everything," said the minister.

They wanted crimes? At that moment Anne could imagine no crime worse than the law that held her.

"Did you try to poison the minister?" Gessler suggested, "turning the wine in his mouth into a foul and unnatural substance?"

Looking up she said, "Blood is not foul nor unnatural."

"It war na blood," said the minister. "Do ye dare deny that ye tried to poison me?"

"I dare deny nothing."

"Put down that she poisoned me. War ye at the Black Mass an Eve o' May?"

"It was not a mass," said Anne. "There was no priest." She stared up at McNab, seeing how they must have found the May rite, and her croft. No wonder McNab was so horribly mangled.

"But ye did attend his heathen masses."

Anne said that she had. The boy took down the dates.

"What other witches war wi ye an May Eve?"

"I was drunk on Jock Barley's Blood."

"Note that she drank blood," said the minister. The poor scared clerk quickly wrote it down. "Now give us names."

She looked up at McNab's hanging flesh, thinking what would happen to anyone she named. So she gave them the name of Harry, her husband's brother. He took the Earldom from Tom. She gave them her treacherous cousin Crookback Darce, and the Earl of Sussex, and everyone in England who had ever betrayed her, ending with Queen Elizabeth.

"Queen Elizabeth?"

"Yes, I am an English countess. I did not learn my witchcraft in Scotland. The Queen of England is a witch, and her ladies are her coven."

"This is na surprising. The rule o' women is an abomination before God," said the minister, "but we need Scots names, Scots witches."

"We can try the boot," said Gessler.

"I admitted. I confessed." Gessler started to turn the screw. She could hear the scrape of metal on metal and clerk's parchment shaking. First there was pressure, then pain.

"Scots names."

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"The priest McNab," she gasped. Much good that name would do them.

"Na mar pert answers now," said the minister.

Calf muscles screamed in the vise, binding, tearing. "Name the girl," said Gessler helpfully as he tightened the boot. "We have her confession."

Metal grated on bone. Again she heard Mary speaking in her head, "*Anne, doona give up the dance.*"

"Yes, if you must have her," Anne yelled. How could she hold anything back? "Alison was there. She is a witch."

"What about the girl's mother?"

"Please God." The bone seemed about to break.

"Good Mother Scott," said the minister. "Da na take the Larid's name, witch. Wan mar pert answer an we break this lēg."

"No, not her." Anne needed a name. Only one came to her. "Jock Armstrong of the Syde. He put the blood in your mouth. Please, I have given you names."

The minister leaned forward, speaking right in her sweating face. "The girl Alison Scott admitted to carnal intercurse wi' the devil disguised as Jock Armstrang o' the Syde. Did ye have intercurse wi' him too?"

"No," she shook her head. Then she saw that was the wrong answer. "Yes, yes, my leg."

"What did it feel like?"

"What?" Her leg hurt so.

"Was it hot or cold to hae the devil inside ye?"

"Oh God."

Gessler backed off on the screw. Anne sank down, shaking, wanting to vomit, trying to feel if her tortured leg had snapped. She could hear the minister and Gessler carry on a distant debate. "Why did ye back aff the boot?"

"The woman has confessed her crimes, and named others. You have enough to burn her a dozen times."

"It was far the sak o' larning. This woman has felt the devil inside her."

"I am here to aid the law, learning must find its own methods. Get a writ that says we must know the shape of Satan's prick, and I will wring the exact dimensions from these women. Until then this step is at an end."

Anne's trial came as anti-climax. Conducted entirely in Scots, it was one of those quick affairs where the only evidence was the word of the condemned. She could follow the language enough to know she had the

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right to recant her confession. That would mean another round of inquiries in the black hole of Jedburgh Keep. Anne would as well skip that step, and go straight to what was coming. So she held her head high, making a virtue of necessity and boldly declared she was a witch, proud to be something that these mean spirited men despised. They glared back, damned her devilish arrogance, ordering her to be taken to the market square, bound to a stake, then burned alive.

Their sentence was neither novel nor imaginative, but Anne could not help feeling that these men had gotten the better of the exchange. Power hath privilege.

Short as the trial was it distracted Anne from the monotony of lying on her belly in her cell, letting her body heal. Healing took time, since they would give her no meat. Her right foot would never be the same. One toe was missing, another gnarled and crooked. Still she trained herself to walk on it. The judges had promised her one last walk in the open air. The short walk from cart to stake. Through her open stone cross she could see the market square. The gallows, stocks, and burning stakes. Her defeat was now complete. She had given in to pain, accusing herself and those she cared for, and who cared for her. There was one act left to play. A last penance to pay.

At times she felt completely crazed with fear; at others, uncannily calm — living moment by moment, feeling the touch of her mattress, the lightness during the day, the silence of night. She watched spring clouds through the cross in the stone, felt fingers move, made peace with her aching body. Gessler had brought her body and soul together. She had subdued her soul to save her body, but soon body and soul would be seared savagely apart. She did not fear being burnt to nothing. Since childhood the Church had promised her and threatened her with the soul's immortality. She did fear being burnt. She wept for the life she was leaving, trying to sing the sorrow out of her soul:

We came all so gay
To our Mother's bower,
As the dew in May
That riseth from the flower.

The evening before the morning of burning she had another distrac-

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tion, a visit from the pimply boy who had preached the Sabbath sermon in the new kirk. It amazed Anne that the lad did not seem to have aged at all. That dull Sabbath was a lifetime ago — so many moments away.

What he would have to say to her Anne could not in the least imagine. Another lecture on the harlotry of Rome or refinements in kirk architecture seemed absurdly out of place. Instead the boy launched into a monologue on the reformed religion and the triumph of science over superstition. Faith was now based on rational reading of scripture. For the first time since the prophets, men worshiped a just and reasonable God.

Anne let him run on, barely listening to the words, then she cut him off. "Bring this to an end. My time is more precious than yours. Reasonable men plan to pile fagots around my feet and set them afire at an ungodly hour on the morrow. What is the Kirk prepared to do for me?"

The boy looked flustered.

"I feared the Kirk was not going to be all that reasonable. So what is it? Breakfast at the Lord's Table after the burning — if I bow to your religion? Order me something more than nettle soup."

The boy brightened. "Wall, I hope ta shew ye that such irrational fancies ar but papist superstition. Na men an earth could promise ye a place in heaven. God's grace is His ta give, an nothing we do on earth may sway the Almighty Will. I ken this is a hard doctrine, but the anly reasonable one. Take the thief an the cross, who war never baptised nar heard communion, but Christ promised him. . . ."

"You take the thief on the cross. If Christ has his mind made up, *what are you pestering me for?*"

The boy sawed around his words some more, then said, "If ye would accept the Kirk we canna see ye inta heaven, but we can see ye are na burnt an earth."

"Not burnt?" Her whole body responded. She leaned forward, fingers dug into the mattress, knees tight, heels pressed together. Why had the boy been beating about?

"Yes, ye papists think that burning is sam superstitious cleansing. Rational men ken it is anly cruel punishment. If ye fully recanted and accepted the Kirk thar would be na reason ta burn ye fur witchery."

Her mind reeled through a wild dance. Had they dragged her to the stake just to tell her what they wanted? She would admit it had won her full attention. "What must I say?"

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"Oh, thar ar na fixed words," the boy assured her. "What matters is the heart. Just pray wi me. Spend yer time left in the bosom o' the Kirk."

"Time left?"

"Wall naturally ye must pay far crimes committed, that war anly reasonable. Ye attempted to poison a preacher, an plotted wi the devil. That carries a penalty o' hanging, though na o' burning," the boy said brightly.

Anne relapsed into monotonous agony.

"It would be anly reasonable ta take hanging over burning," said the boy. "Burning is so terrible ta endure — an even ta do."

"Stop," she shrieked, leaping up, stamping with the heel of her hurt foot. "Stop before you make me totally mad. If all the Kirk offers me is to do a rope dance for crimes I did not commit then leave me to my superstition. I would spend my last night alone, if that *war* reasonable."

"Ye did na try ta poison the minister?"

"No one did, otherwise the gibbering fool would be dead."

"That war far the law ta decide. It would need a judge, na a preacher."

"A judge and a torturer." She jerked back her shift to show the boy her mangled toes. "I have had more Scots law than I ever wanted to know." She twisted her leg, so he could see the burns. "And spare me the lectures on the horrors of burning. I have had my practical lesson."

Taken aback the boy asked her to please cover her leg. She was not being rational, "but arguing fram feelings an flaunting yer body, the way a woman wudd."

Anne shouted him out of her cell, free to be the hysterical, benighted female. The insufferable boy had raised her hopes with his dithering, destroying her carefully hoarded resignation. For a terrible long time she stumped about the cell on her hurt foot, trying to recover from his visit. Slowly her anger turned back to sorrow, and she knelt before the dark empty cross.

It was full night outside. The cross hung speckled with stars, letting moonlight into her cell. Hands clasped, she opened her heart to Mary, anguish gushing from its spring deep within. Putting every particle of her fear into prayer, she asked if Mary really meant for her to die so horribly.

No answer. She let her cheek slip down to the cold step, resting her fingers on the stone sill.

From the fields beyond the rooftops came the lonely, wavering call of a wolf. Anne looked up, straining at the darkness. "Jock?" The fields were

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black, but after a time she saw a dark shape trot through the moonlit market square, between the gallows and the burning stakes. The wolf padded right up to the cleared space around the keep, sat down on his haunches, and started scratching.

"Jock, is that you?"

The wolf howled again, lower and deeper, a call to carry through stone. Flickering wings came out of the night. A dove landed in front of her face, balancing on the narrow sill.

Anne slid back.

The dove cocked her head, studied the woman, hopped down to the stone step, then stepped toward the straw mattress. As she stepped down, the dove grew. Feathers fluttered upward, billowing into a great white cloak, draped over a tall slim maiden. She had fierce child's eyes and stood naked as a child would, unconcerned by what her feather cloak did not cover, the same sad gay look on her face.

Anne summoned her courage and asked, "Mary, do you mean for me to die?" Her heart already feared what the answer was.

"Yes Anne, all mortals must die, an return ta the dust an ashes that made ye."

"Yes, but must I die this sunrise in such a hideous fashion?"

"What does it matter when or how ye die, if ye have na danced!" She did a swift twirl, becoming Maid Mary of the Greenwood, dancing merry among the homeless and outcast.

"Danced?"

"Anne, we hae piped fur ye, an ye hae nat danced. Ye hae only struggled against the fire."

"It is so near to morning," she shivered. How could she talk to this immortal Maiden about the fears and horrors that plain people faced. The Scots had finally convinced Anne of Northumberland that she was indeed a very plain person.

The Maiden's face softened. *"Anne, do ye think that I do na suffer whan my children suffer! Whan they nail my son ta the cross! Whan they burn my daughters! Thar is na time better ta dance than now."*

Anne pulled herself up, steadying her hand against the cell wall to save her foot. Mary fluttered downward, becoming a dove again. Leaning against the wall, Anne watched as the dove began to dance atop the cross of moonlight cast upon the stones. Bobbing, weaving, bowing and turning,

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the bird strutted in a spiraling pattern. Anne knew the pattern. She had seen it on cathedral floors, in pleasure mazes, and in ancient labyrinths scratched on stone and bone. She had last seen it on Eve of May. It was the spiral of death and rebirth, spinning into the dark tomb and out of the womb.

Anne began to follow. Spiraling in and spiraling out she circled her cell behind the bird. As the spiral tightened she let go of the wall. Piping sad and gay drifted over the walls of the keep and through the empty cross, called into being by the dance. Tones rose and fell, tracing out the holy spiral in tunes on air.

Favoring her right foot, Anne spun on her left, following the dove across the flags. She clasped her hands behind her back, the way the dove folded her wings, dancing as Alison had done by the fallen kirk upon the green.

Faster and faster turned the pattern. Anne followed the labyrinth inward, forgetting her fears, forgetting fire and death, forgetting all but the dance and the body. Toward dawn her steps faltered. Sinking down on her tattered mattress she lay listening, letting the piping lull her to sleep. The dove hopped up the step, then onto the stone sill. Spreading wings she fluttered through the narrow slit, flying into the fiery light of morning. Anne muttered goodbye to Mary, and the sleep that came was dreamless.

Too soon, too soon, the guards came to wake her, having to shake her hard. Opening her eyes she saw that they were annoyed, muttering that they had never seen a criminal sleep so deep on execution morn. Anne made them wait, brushing the straw out of her hair before they bound her hands. One said she was, "a troublesome lass as wall as being a witch."

Then they took her down to a small stone postern where the cart was waiting in the cold, with Alison and the body of McNab. Hands bound, the women could not embrace, so Anne greeted her handmaid with a kiss, saying it was so good to be quit of the keep. Shivering in dirty white linen, Alison gave her a weak, worried smile.

"Did Mary come to you?" asked Anne.

The girl shook her head.

"Of course, you already know the dance."

Alison stared at Anne as though she were mad, but Anne merely turned sideways, so their hands could touch. "Come close and take my hand while we talk." When their hands met, Anne felt that two of the girl's fingers were gone.

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The tumbril jerked into motion, rumbling over the cobbles of the keep, thundering across the drawbridge planks. Jolting through the narrow streets the women stood side by side, hands clasped, faces turned toward each other. Anne spoke just loud enough to be heard over the hollow thump of the wheels, seeing nothing but the girl's wan and anxious smiles. The hands in hers felt feverish damp despite the morning chill, but Anne did not let go until they reached the market square.

McNab's body was taken straight from the cart and bound to a stake. Then the Minister of Jedburgh mounted the wagon, rope in hand. Anne looked away, seeing for the first time the grim array of bitter faces. She saw interest, anger, and shame in their eyes, these people who had left warm beds or morning work to see two women burned alive.

Morning work was not entirely undone; enough bundles of fagots were piled round the stakes for swift, hot fires. The Minister of Jedburgh made one last attempt to disappoint the crowd. He offered Alison the rope they call the ringless plum. If she would recant her witchery and beg forgiveness from the Kirk she would be hung before burning.

Anne heard Alison whisper, and turned, trying to catch what the girl was saying to the man. Alison looked down, parting her lips with her tongue and speaking softly. The minister leaned closer, telling her to speak up, this was her last chance to escape the flames.

She looked up and spit full in his face.

The Minister of Jedburgh jerked back, and Anne laughed. He looked to her as if some employer had told him he would "get na mar than a groat" for the labor of the parish orphans. Wiping his face he turned to Anne, merely holding out the rope.

Still laughing she started to dance. Turning on her good foot, she scattered the straw on the floorboards, spinning to face Alison. The startled girl stared, then began to dance too, stumbling at first, but finding she could still use her feet. The women laughed and wheeled together as though the cart were a stage, as though it were the world.

Piping sprang up to accompany their dance, coming from the horse-lines where men had tethered their hobbys.

Anne saw the minister's face twist into an almost insane grimace. His feet started to twitch. Clinging to his hemp noose, he began to shuffle and trot, dragged into the dance atop the cart.

Dancing mania spread into the crowd. Apprentice boys capered with

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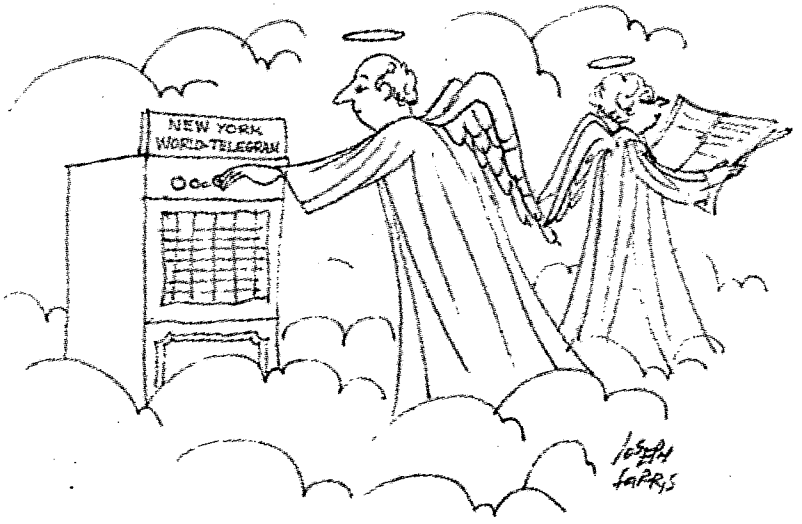
their masters. Guards threw down their tall rounded axes and started stomping about with burgher's wives, and with each other.

The piping rose, coming clearer and nearer. Through the excitement a man came riding from the horselines, piping on the back of a borrowed hobby, towing two led horses behind him. With one hand and a long sword the Armstrong cut the priest's crumpled body from the stake, then slung the McNab over his saddle. Leading his hobbys up to the cart, Jock leaned between the rails and cut the women's bounds.

Anne helped her handmaid mount, then took the remaining horse. Puffing his cheeks, Jock played louder and the people of Jedburgh twirled madly. Anne saw the minister with bonnet off and coat flapping, sweating with rage and exertion.

Their three horses rode through the capering throng and across the sleeping fields. Anne looked at Jock with loving eyes, thinking how just this once he "war the only man na dancing."



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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Great and Secret Show, Clive Barker, Harper & Row, $19.95

Astounding Days, Arthur C. Clarke, Bantam, $8.95

The Flying Warlord, Leo Frankowski, Del Rey, $3.95

CLIVE BARKER, as just about anyone can tell you, is that fellow who is supposed to be better than Stephen King ... who is supposed to be better than anybody, for that matter, at the business of writing horror. As a matter of fact, even I have said that he is very good, a few years ago. But if that is so now, then there are some things about the horror genre that I don't understand.

The Great and Secret Show is a long book, and it is only the first of an indefinite series called The Books of The Art. And it's part of a "multigenerational saga" according to the PR package that came with it from Harper & Row's busy hands. So we can safely assume that we are going to have this book and its sequels with us for some time. This would seem to call for something extraordinary ... some idea that would so infallibly engage the mind that book after book would barely suffice for its working out. And, given that idea, *really* working it out — no ifs, ands, or bunt singles when a home run is called for.

Ah, well — one out of two isn't normally bad, but I would much rather have seen the meticulous working out of a lesser idea.

The idea is that any number of people over the years since time began have been aware that actually the universe is nothing like it seems to be. Cause and effect are actually related in a way different from the accepted explanation, and in fact can be influenced by mere mortals only coincidentally — the real actors are demigods, going about their demigod ways, and the ordinary ruck of humankind is helpless to say yea or nay whenever one or more of the demigods take an interest. Which is not often, really.

Now, this is a crackling good

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horror idea. It is not new to Barker, but it has never been worked out on any sort of large scale, and you would expect someone who has as many credentials as Barker has to do a good job of it.

Sorry.

The idea comes to Jaffe, a marginally employable sort holding his latest dead-end job, in the dead letter office of the post office in Omaha, Nebraska. Given the job of sorting through all of the undeliverable mail, he gradually comes to realize this. People seem to write about it, but sometimes deliberately smudge the envelopes so that the letters can neither be delivered nor returned. Gradually, through the months of sorting, Jaffe forms a sort of picture of half-uttered truths and half-understood suppositions, and a religion called The Shoal which explains it even further — except that he can never find any clearcut statement of The Shoal's doctrine.

But one day the man who assigned him the job in the dead letter office in the first place decides that Jaffe is up to something, and Jaffe kills him. Not only that, he sets fire to the post office, which apparently completely covers his tracks, and not only that, from then on he has things pretty much his own way. When he needs money, he finds it. When he needs transportation, sex or *anything*, he gets it. And of all these things, he needs transportation the most, because he is off on an extended period of wandering, having shaken the dust of Omaha.

Now, that doesn't sound all that bad, given that a review can't actually show any evidence — can't, for instance, reproduce the text of any letters, or explain what on Earth would lead any number of "correspondents" to take this extraordinary way of letting the world in on their secret knowledge, which seems minimally productive. But the fact is that I've given you as much as there is — Barker doesn't actually show you any evidence either. The opening of the book is almost entirely descriptive, and long parts of it continue to be. When, for instance, we encounter Fletcher, and Raul, we do not meet them as characters; we meet them as abstract ideas, which only gradually assume some sort of personal characteristics. And in the case of Fletcher, we never do come to grips with him.

Which is too bad, because the struggle between Fletcher and the entity which has come to be known as the Jaff forms the central active part of this book.

Fletcher, you see, is a researcher who has some extraordinary ideas about evolution, and Jaffe funds him, in a secret laboratory, during his search for the Nuncio — *the*

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substance which enables him to turn Raul from a monkey into something very much like a human being. But we barely see this; once again, Barker contents himself with describing Jaffe's encountering Fletcher, Jaffe's raising the money, etc., in a relatively few words. When we first really see Fletcher, and Raul, all of this is already done, with the result that, again it is as if we were reading a review of the book instead of reading the book.

Well, Fletcher and Jaffe both drink some of the Nuncio, and a titanic struggle ensues, in which the Jaff contends with Fletcher for quite some time. And, once again, the struggle is described, not seen, and, once again, it ends inconclusively, except that the Jaff and Fletcher wind up hard by — or, rather, under the southern California town where most of the remaining action will take place. To be as precise as Barker will let me, they are locked in each other's arms, hundreds of feet below the surface of the Earth, and there they stay, exhausted, for quite some years.

Whereupon we come to the League of Virgins.

These are four daughters of the town, and they all decide to go swimming in a forest pool, which has formed after a terrific rainstorm. Well, the pool happens to lie atop the place where the Jaff and Fletcher are buried, and it so happens that although the water is undisturbed, it is actually draining into the caverns below at a terrific rate, and the result is that Fletcher and the Jaff get at these girls.

This is actually the first truly detailed scene, and it's very well done. But it is followed by a relatively brief description of the way three of the girls get themselves pregnant as soon as possible thereafter, and one of them, who can't get pregnant, goes to great lengths to find that out, and the next thing you know, one of them has twins — a boy and a girl — and stays in town, one of them moves out of town and has a boy, and the other two are written out of the script.

Much else happens, including the return of the one boy and his falling in love with the girl, the death of the comedian, and the explosion of the atomic bomb in 1945, which is possible in this chronology because one of the characters has maintained a "time loop" which holds the event in stasis. And Barker does a good job, now and then, of detailing one scene or another. But one never gets a sense of the book, because the next moment he is simply summarizing. And the summaries don't seem to fall naturally . . . that is, they're not devoted to material which is secondary in nature. Sometimes he sum-

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marizes quite important material, and sometimes he devotes lovingly realized passages to comparative trivia.

Now there are several explanations to this, chief among them being that I missed something. More charitably, that Barker has some system which determines for him whether he is to spend time on a scene or not, independent of story needs — say, the toss of a coin. In a way, it would fit; the nature of the story being what it is, it would make sense that one wouldn't want it told too plainly. But I don't think so. I think Barker simply has dropped the ball, for all that he disguises that fact pretty well.

Presumably, this puts me in a tiny minority of reviewers, and you will be reading mostly, elsewhere, about what a good book this is and the reviewer can hardly wait for the next one. But there is a difference between the book badly told and the bad book. I think what we have here is much more the good book badly told than it is the bad book, and I find that the disappointment is far worse than if Barker had not touched this idea at all.

Onward. Arthur C. Clarke's newest book is minor, peculiar, and charming. It is not, by the way, despite Bantam's attempt to find some handle with which to approach the market, an autobiography or a history of the field, or anything else but Arthur C. Clarke talking about many things, beginning with *Astounding* to be sure.

I found it very difficult to put down for any length of time, and in fact did not do so any more than was absolutely necessary. This is not because it is fraught with significance. It is not; it is the purest piffle, to anyone not a science fiction fan.

It begins with Clarke's reaction to *Astounding* from Issue One onward, and many an apt remark gets made as he judges the worth of a science idea contained in one of the stories (I don't believe he found more than a handful that would stand up to even the actual science of their day), and then says, as he does more often than you would suppose, that nevertheless he thoroughly enjoyed the story.

This does not go on for long enough; essentially, the young Clarke's reading habits were modified by World War II and subsequent events. In any case, he sold "Loophole" to *ASF* in 1944, I believe, and it was published in 1945, with "Rescue Party" soon to follow. The rest is history, as they say, meaning that Clarke became a public figure and the public figure has been pretty well tracked.

But it is not the public figure

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who is being displayed here, by and large. It is young Arthur C. Clarke, with his difficulties fitting himself to the British educational system, very engagingly turning to *Astounding* for entertainment; it is the somewhat older but still unknown Clarke who, as a noncommissioned officer, participated in the events that led to *Glide Path*, his only non-SF novel. (Which, by the way, you should read; it's not spectacularly remarkable, and, as Clarke says, the technology has been bypassed by a more elegant system, but you'd be surprised by how well it reads, and how hopeful it is.)

At any rate, after it leaves *Astounding*, the book never again has even a nominal focus. It just consists of Arthur C. Clarke, and though the remarks are autobiographical *imprimis*, they don't fall together into an autobiography. It is, as I said, a minor work. And I, as I said, found it extremely difficult to put down. It is the fastest read I can recall, of all the books I have ever read.

Perhaps the single most interesting thing about it is that the *Astounding* of which Clarke speaks is as much Harry Bates' *Astounding* as it is John Campbell's. When it comes to detailed reminiscence, specifically, it is almost all Bates. And that's an *Astounding* I'll bet most of you out there have never even heard of.

Now, perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps I'm all alone in detecting virtues in this unfocussed, untargetted book of, essentially, one man's memories of a time that has largely shrunk into the dim recesses of the past. Perhaps you'll find yourself reading review after review in which this book is shrugged off as one of those unaccountable things that wouldn't have been at all, if the Clarke name were not such a potent force on the newsstand. But by God I liked it, and I would hazard a guess you will, too.

Which brings us to Leo Frankowski's *The Flying Warlord*.

I think — I think — that this brings Conrad Stargard's story to a close. Certainly the invasion for which he has been frantically preparing finally occurs, and Europe is saved from the fate which actually befell it in our timeline . . . the Mongol invasion which drastically altered the course of Polish history in the thirteenth century. But you knew all that, if you cared to know it at all, because from Book One (*The Cross-Time Engineer*) onward, Conrad Stargard has been an extremely resourceful fellow.

He began, if you will recall, as a Communist Polish engineer, on vacation in the Tatra Mountains, who is shifted across time and space from our Twentieth Century into

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the distant past. At first, one isn't too sure of why this happened; in *The Flying Warlord*, we discover that it is because the boind poith, and furthermore there is reason to believe the people who occasionally drop into the narrative (when the tape is stopped for a moment) not only boind poith very badly indeed, they don't exist at the time they would certainly thank you to believe they did, though there is some reason to believe they started the human race. (Frankowski doesn't make the latter point, and perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps Frankowski is mistaken.)

I think — now that I have stopped to shake my head very strongly indeed, and lain down for a while, too — that all of that is unnecessary; that the story could have proceeded without any rationale at all. But it makes for an interesting sidebar to the main tale, which is, after all, precisely how does one twentieth century engineer, bereft of all supplies, go about transforming the Polish culture to the point where in a handful of years it is capable of standing off the Mongol invasion? Particularly if he is a Communist, but every step seems to lead inevitably to one piece of paternalism after another?

Well, that story is played out, with time away from it long enough to bed an amazing number of wenches, as well as have some, again, interesting but unessential asides with a horse that isn't, and her children. It has taken four books to do it, if we count this one, which is rather short. (But which adds a very long Appendix, detailing all the minutiae of how Conrad got where he got, and what baggage he created, and where it all led, up to a point.)

Was it worth it? Well, no, unless you're a dedicated fan of alternate time-track stories, in which case, yes. Frankly, the first book was the best one, and each one since then has slipped a little, until the fourth book just sort of trails off.

Mind you, it's not by any means a total loser. Such news as the fact that the invasion took place before the Mongols became short and slant eyed, and other little tidbits, keep the interest level high enough so that one tends to keep reading. But it is also an undeniable fact that rather than come to some sort of glorious climax, the book and the story simply end. In fact, it is only in going on to read the Appendix that one can be sure (?) the story is over.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this series of books is that the author stuck with it. On the one hand, what else could he do, short of simply announcing that he wasn't going to do it, which

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would undoubtedly have gotten him a very sharp reproof from del Rey, and a total disappearance of his byline forevermore, probably. I mean, it just isn't in it, really; one has to go on. But I wonder — I really wonder — if Frankowski had any idea, when he started, just how much work it was going to be, and where it was going to go, and how little or how much of it he would enjoy when all was said and done.

It isn't bad, it isn't good. It just is. The only thing I can be reasonably sure of is that in this case the other reviewers and I will agree. Well, one out of three isn't bad, I suppose.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

I'M NOT the guy who writes the critical essays in this magazine, but I thought I'd give this a shot. A few weeks ago, I was asked to write a one-shot column of sf reviews for the L.A. Times. As a lead-in, I wrote an essay about the place of science fiction in contemporary literature. It was cut for publication — omitting all the parts that would be most offensive to people committed to the academic-literary view of American literature. So, with our kindly editor's indulgence, I'd like to offer the unexpurgated version here. Consider it to be a Manifesto of Democratic Art:

When it comes to the storytelling arts, America is a country that can't make up its mind whether it's glad or ashamed to be a democracy. On the one hand, we produce art that is in demand throughout the world. Our films, our television shows, and our popular fiction are irresistible competition for homegrown arts in almost every other nation. Nobody knows how to talk to — and for — the common man better than the American popular artist.

On the other hand, we're never really sure that our enormously successful art is really "good." We persist in measuring our popular literature against the more difficult, subtle, allusive, elitist "serious" literature of Europe, and instead of recognizing that our popular art is merely trying to do something different, we keep coming to the conclusion that it is second-rate. After all, nothing can be "art" that is clear and powerful and simple enough for millions of people to understand and love it — can it?

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As a result, we Americans persist in giving the most respect to the kind of literature that is least enjoyed by the wide audience, even as we — and the rest of the world — give the bulk of our time and money to the films, the TV shows, and the prose fiction that actually tell stories that anyone can understand.

Science fiction, as an American-born genre, bears the scars of this long struggle. It came to life in the pulp magazines of the 1930's, which gives it unassailable credentials as a democratic art. Despised even by the college English departments that have been forced to offer undergraduate courses in that spaceship stuff, science fiction persists in being the literature-of-choice among the best and brightest American adolescents, and retains a wide following among the adult reading public. Yet almost universally, those who read it and write it feel an almost pathological need to duck their heads and confess that science fiction isn't really "literature."

The academic-literary establishment claims that their kind of storytelling is superior to all others because it is more subtle, because it offers greater insights about human life. One might wonder, however, if a "greater insight" has in fact been "offered" when it is not stated plainly, but instead is encoded so that only those trained in the Mysteries of Literature can decipher it. And, too often, we who are so trained discover that the "insight" is puerile, quotidian, or extravagantly dumb. Clearly it is no longer the supposed "insight" that the academic-literary establishment writes and reads for, but rather the process of encoding itself; the reward is not the discovery of truth, but rather the reassuring knowledge that the literary reader knows a secret code that lesser mortals will never learn.

In short, a fair part of the study of literature has come to resemble the bestowing of Captain Marvel decoder rings, and the process of reading literary fiction has come to resemble the process of working one's way through an issue of Games Magazine. It's very hard work, and not everyone can do it, but when it's done, what do you have except a bunch of meaningless marks on paper? Yet they have the effrontery to call this "serious literature." Do they think the rest of us are only kidding?

We in the speculative fiction community have another term for what they do. We call it "li-fi."

It may take a writer with a subtle mind to discover a fresh insight into human life and society. But isn't it then the writer's responsibility to reveal this insight in his fiction as clearly as possible, so that this newly-discovered truth is available to as many readers as possible? And if this

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truth actually matters, shouldn't it be presented in such a way as to have the most powerful impact on the reader's mind and emotions?

The plain storyteller does not necessarily have better ideas, but without question his ideas are the ones that will have the most powerful influence over the greatest number of people. Thus the "subtle" writers of the academic-literary establishment go off and play polo, their feet never touching the ground, while they abandon the football field to those of us who are willing to get down in the mud.

Science fiction is simply one of the ways in which the American need for plain storytelling surfaced after being nearly drowned in the flood of Modernism early in this century. As Eliotesque literary elitism spread like a social disease through the then-new academic-literary community of America, infecting everyone who lay down with this most deft of literary seducers, the American hunger for plain, honest storytelling had to surface somewhere. And where it surfaced was in the literature of starships and aliens, transforming it into today's literature of imagined counterrealities.

The Elephant Talks To God, Dale Estey, ill. Angela Webb O'Hara (Goose Lane Editions, 248 Brunswick St. Fredericton, NB Canada E3B 1G9; paper, 61pp, $9.95)
The King's Fountain, Lloyd Alexander, ill. Ezra Jack Keats (Dutton/Unicorn, paper, 32pp, $3.95)

Fables are almost a lost art. Or, rather, the fable has been relegated to children's literature, so that adults rarely see the best of these jewel-like stories. Here are a couple, though, that are well worth your attention —even if you pretend that you're buying them for a child.

Dale Estey's *The Elephant Talks to God* is, first and foremost, a witty, satirical book about the relationship between mortals and an immortal creator. Some inner clues make it clear that Estey is a Catholic and the story was first written shortly after a rapid succession of popes back when John-Paul I died a month after beginning his reign, and there is a wholly gratuitous dig at Jehovah's Witnesses, but these flaws aside, the book is charming without cloying, and I enjoyed it enormously. We can see again why Aesop chose to tell his fables from the point of view of animals rather than human beings — the very animalness of the hero helps clarify the vital issues involved, as the story separates the incidental details of individual life from the more general verities. In other words, fables use animals the way science fiction uses aliens, to explain human behavior by putting it in a strange

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context.

Just to give you a taste of this particular fable, here's a snatch of dialogue when the elephant expresses dissatisfaction with one of God's answers:

"That's not up to me," said God, and the cloud started moving away.

"That's it?" asked the elephant. "It's not up to you?"

"Sorry," said God.

"That's not very profound," shouted the elephant at the disappearing cloud.

"You're only an elephant," answered God.

Another fable is Lloyd Alexander's *The King's Fountain*, first published in 1971, but now reissued with bold illustrations by Ezra Jack Keats. It's a simple story of a poor man who realizes that the fountain the king is having built will deprive the city below of its drinking water. He tries to get businessmen and scholars and men of physical strength to speak to the king, but is finally forced to face the king himself. There the king is as fearsome and unreasonable as one would expect kings to be — until he finally understands the impossibility of arguing with the poor man and the uselessness of killing him, and begins to listen.

In the context of recent events in Eastern Europe, *The King's Fountain* takes on added power. It also shows that the fable is still a viable way to tell wonderful, true stories — even if they do end up being sold only to children. Who knows? The children may grow up understanding things a bit better than their much-more-sophisticated parents.

Children of the Wind, Kate Wilhelm, (St. Martin's, cloth, 263pp, $16.95)

Four of these five novellas — "The Gorgon Field," "A Brother to Dragons, a Companion of Owls," "The Blue Ladies," and "The Girl Who Fell into the Sky" — have been published before, though a couple appeared in places where relatively few of you probably had a chance to see them. For me, though, the prize of this collection is the title story, which appears in this book for the first time.

Wilhelm's greatest excellence is in her understanding of the way people are able to live together, experience the same events, and yet remain utter strangers to each other. Her fiction, at its best, takes us into the alien mind of another human being and gives us a clear understanding of the way he or she sees the world. "Children of the Wind" gives us two perspectives, the father and mother of two remarkable twin boys.

The father, Robert, is a children's book editor; the mother, June, is an illustrator of children's books. If any-

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Next month: "Hyena Eyes," an exciting new novelet by Ray Aldridge, along with "Final Tomte," compelling SF from Judith Moffett.

Soon: stories by Ian Watson, Philip Jose Farmer, Alan Brennert, John Kessel, Kathe Koja and many others.

The June issue is on sale May 1.

one should understand children, they should — yet each seems to view their sons' behavior through lenses distorted by their own personal needs. June, depressed and lonely, persists in seeing the boys as a sort of enemy-in-duplicate, interpreting their scrapes and mischief as malicious and sinister. Robert, hungry for joy, persists in seeing them as innocent, puckish youths whose pranks and pratfalls are the result of a rambunctious joie-de-vivre.

Even at the end, the question of which of them was right is never answered. Everything can always be explained either way. Wilhelm's point, I think, is that we never know — and we can't be sure whether to be relieved or appalled that the parent who will deal with these strange boys throughout the rest of their lives is the one who thinks the worst of them.

The whole book is a pleasure even when it causes pain, and I recommend it highly. Novellas are long enough that, particularly in the hands of a master like Wilhelm, they have the same sort of impact as a novel; the result is that you're getting something like five books in one. A bargain in hardcover.

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This colorful and amusing tale comes to us from John Maddox Roberts, who has published more than 20 novels, most recently THE ENIGMA VARIATIONS (Berkley). He lives with his wife, Bethany, on a mountaintop on the Virginia-Kentucky border, from which he can see more than fifty miles. He says this gives him perspective into both reality and unreality.

Stoney Griffon and the UFO People

By John Maddox Roberts

STONEY STILL FELT a little funny when he went into the Four Foot Seam, because he'd only been old enough to go in there for about six months. Rufus Yadkin owned the place, which had been started by his daddy, Nestor. That had been during Prohibition, but Nestor was the sheriff back then, and his brother was a judge, and nobody gave a good goddamn about that fool Yankee Law, anyway.

There were only three or four customers at the tables when Stoney went in. Being there at that hour meant they were either laid off or worked the evening shift. Rufus was behind the bar below the electric clock that advertised Coors and had a shimmery waterfall tumbling perpetually over Rufus's collection of army-unit patches. It was comfortably dim in the bar after the glary summer light outside, and Stoney slid onto one of the vinyl-padded stools. Through his jeans he could feel a strip of duct tape that patched a cut in the vinyl.

"What you drinkin', Stoney?" Rufus asked, already reaching for the

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toggle on top of the Bud draft tap.

"Bud draft," Stoney said, just as the first splash hit the bottom of the glass. There was a man hunched over on a stool next to him, hands wrapped around a glass, body wrapped in a long overcoat in spite of the heat outside. "What you say, Custis?" Stoney said.

Custis Tuttle had a long nose in the middle of a stubbly face. "Been trying to tell Rufus about what's happenin', but you can't talk sense to a man that owns a bar and plans to run for public office. The two roles of public benefactor and professional parasite ain't compatible. It's plumb schizophrenic. Still, if a man's of a mind to join the ranks of the mighty, seems like he ort to accept the counsel of them that knows who really runs this world."

Rufus polished a glass and winked at Stoney. "Custis been telling me about the ozone."

Stoney knew about that. His last year in high school, the word had come down from wherever they knew about such things that there was a big old hole in the ozone, and the rays coming through were likely to fry everybody crisp as bacon. There'd been a panic among the young male community because it might mean that the girls in town and over at the college might stop splaying themselves out in their skimpy little bikinis come summer. The boys at school had turned to Stoney for a solution, because he'd placed high in a statewide essay contest. He'd written a piece for the school paper that got reprinted in *The Stripmine*, which was the local paper, that the whole ozone panic was a bunch of Yankee bullshit, and that skin cancer and wrinkles and such were caused by defective tampons. It must have worked, because the annual flesh display went on right on schedule, and the tampon people were in trouble already.

"It's the Nazis," Custis was saying.

"Which Nazis?" Stoney asked him. "American Nazi Party? Don't seem to me they can get a parade permit, much less screw around with the ozone."

"Not them Nazis." Custis took a long drink of his beer to get the taste of disgust out of his mouth. "Them boggers is so inconsequential they got to crane their necks upward to see snakeshit in a wagon track. I mean the old ones. They's still around. They got them a place down in the Anartic. Got 'em a whole fleet of UFOs, too. They been up there messin' with the ozone and a whole bunch of other things. Already got our water fluoridated, don't they?"

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"Custis," Rufus said, "it just don't stand to reason. How could it be that a bunch of schnitzel-stuffin' Kraut gobblers that couldn't even get a few hours' air superiority over the English Channel have a fleet of flying saucers? And that was against a air force equipped with Spitfires that was already obsolete by nineteen and forty-three." Rufus belonged to the Military Book Club, and he had every book ever written on the only two wars that ever counted: World War II and the War Against Northern Aggression.

"I never said they had UFOs back then. It was only right at the end, when they started shootin' them V-2s way up past the stratosphere. That was when the aliens noticed 'em. They tracked one of them rockets back to Peenemünde and got some answers outen a few of the technicians that wasn't quick enough to surrender theirselfs to the Allies. They went to the bunker in Berlin and made the Nazis a proposition."

"I got a proposition," Rufus interrupted. "I propose you both order another draft."

"Suits me," Stoney told him.

"My grandma," Custis said, "used to sing a song about the folly of shingling the rum seller's roof. Always seemed un-Christian to me to let your fellow man go without a sound roof over his head. Draw me another." When they were replenished, he continued.

"Where'd them Nazis end up after the war?"

"Dead, most of 'em," Rufus said. "Except for the ones that went to work for us and the Russians, making rockets."

"That's what I heard," Stoney agreed.

"Don't surprise me," Curtis said. "They don't teach history in the schools no more. That's part of the plot, too. Least Stoney's got an excuse. Rufus, you went to school when a classical education was part of a gentleman's heritage. Didn't neither of you learn about all the Nazis in Argentina?"

"I heard about that," Stoney said. About half the VCRs down at the Video Trough had Nazis in them, and a lot of them were in Argentina.

"Well, what country do you think is closest to Anartica?" Custis said triumphantly. "You remember that Falklands War a few years back? What do you think that was all about? You think the British wanted to keep a bunch of sheep and penguins? Not hardly, they didn't! They got a string of islands all round the Anartic to keep an eye on them UFO bases, and

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the Falklands was vital — that's why they went to war over 'em."

"I just wonder," Rufus said, "That one man can be privy to so many cosmic secrets. 'Specially here in Hash Mountain. With a vested interest in such matters, I have a hard time keeping track of events at the county seat, while you monitor events of galactic significance out of your cabin on South Fork."

"Scoff if you will," Custis told him, "But I'm in contact with forces the very mention of which would curl your hair." He turned to Stoney. "Stoney, Rufus here is past his prime, and his mental processes have ossified. You're young and open-minded. Let's see, you were quarterback for the Hash Mountain Diamondbacks last year, so that makes you what? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen," Stoney said.

"He better be the age it says on his driver's license," Rufus amended.

"Good. It's not too late. You remind me of me when I was your age. Which is to say, bright but ignorant. Also, at your age, all your intellectual functions are impaired because you're perpetually horny as a three-peckered billy goat. No matter. You just come on out to my cabin, and I'll show you irrefutable proof of what I been saying."

"I'll come by," Stoney temporized. "Real soon. I want to hear all about the Nazis and the Antarctic." He was proud that he pronounced all the consonants in the word. "And the UFOs."

"I heard you're going in the navy, Stoney," Rufus said.

"That's right. I leave in six weeks for Great Lakes to do boot camp. I spent the last year running an end loader at the Gem Ridge mine, and there's no future in it."

"Good choice," Custis said, sliding from his stool. "Now, I want you to come to my place, Stoney, y'hear?"

"I hear you, Custis."

"Just don't let them navy people send you to the Anartic. Nor Argentina, neither."

"I'll be careful," Stoney assured him, then he turned back to Rufus. "Patsey McKinney tells me her cousin up in Ottawa has a genuine First Service Force patch that he's willing to sell."

Rufus was interested but cautious. "That's the One Penny Magenta of unit-patch collectors. I been burned before." There was a blank spot in his patch display. Once it had held the red arrowhead patch of the

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U.S.A./Canada First Special Service Force, but a chemist from MIT had analyzed it and found that the red dye dated from 1959 and the Ban-Lon thread couldn't have been made before 1963. Those had been black days for Rufus, and he'd withdrawn from the county commissioner's race in despair.

Just at that moment, Custis Tuttle stepped out the door onto the sidewalk and was struck squarely by a dazzling blue beam of light from overhead, which disrupted his corporeal being in a fashion so spectacular that there were bits of him scattered from the Western Auto at the north end of town all the way to the Gulf Station on Dead Dog Creek.

The scanty clientele of the Four Foot Seam piled out of the bar and goggled at the smoking pile of clothes on the sidewalk. There were bits of liquefied sludge still steaming through the frayed cuffs, and his Red Wing boots stood in front of the door like the footgear of the faithful standing outside a mosque.

"It's spontaneous combustion," said Nevada Wells, who worked at the NAPA store across the street. "I read about it in the *Enquirer* a while back. Said, 'Preacher Blows Up During Sermon.' All about how people just go up in flames at the oddest times. Now it looks like it's happened to old Custis Tuttle. Seems fitting somehow. He never went to church, and they say it always happens to them that drinks too much."

"Hesh up," Ada Boggs told her. Ada worked at the bank next door. "That's true, every third man in this town'll go up in flames. They ain't much, but they're all we got, God help us."

All that was on Stoney's mind the next day when he went out to Custis Tuttle's old cabin out South Fork. There was something wrong with a man just blowing up right in the middle of town, especially on a quiet day like that. Something so extravagant ought to be reserved for a more momentous occasion, like payday at the mines. Of course, Stoney never went to the Four Foot Seam on a payday weekend.

It was always smoky and crowded on those days. Just a year before, he'd been a prize quarterback, and he'd decided not to let himself deteriorate so quick. A man ought not to develop a beer gut before the age of thirty, was how he felt about it. He planned to go downhill in careful and prudent fashion.

The major problem about South Fork was that most of it was under water. That was because of the dam the government had built to control

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the flooding. It seemed like the authorities couldn't stand the thought of all those people being flooded every few years, so they built the dam and created an artificial lake and put five hundred family farms permanently under fifty feet of water. Everybody agreed that they had no more flooding problems after they'd had to move onto hilltops, but farming the hillsides was pure hell after losing all that good bottomland.

Stoney parked his old Pontiac in the little graveled lot next to Delmar Jenks's boat-rental shed. Delmar and his dog came out of the shed, which was made of galvanized, corrugated iron, and hot as hell in summer. Delmar looked glum. So did his dog. When the dam went up, he'd bought this concession. At the town meetings, the government people had told everybody about how great the dam was going to be for the economy, and how people would come from all around to fish and swim and water-ski and picnic and carry on to all hours of the night.

Problem was, the lake flooded some old deep-shaft mines that poisoned the water — so every time the fish-and-game people stocked the lake, the fish all went belly-up in a few weeks. Then the environmentalists got a law passed that you couldn't raise a wake on the water — so there went waterskiing and speedboating, and now the recreation on the lake was pretty much restricted to teenagers skinny-dipping on summer evenings, and so far nobody had figured out a way to make a dime out of that.

"Mornin', Stoney," Delmar said, trying on a smile that didn't fit too well. His dog stayed looking glum. "You want to rent a boat?"

"That's right. I'm going out to the old Tuttle place."

"Don't reckon nobody'll mind. I heered about how he blowed up yesterday. You see it?"

"Sort of. I wasn't looking when he exploded, but I sure heard it. Ran outside, and there was his boots standing there and poor old Custis all over town." He shook his head.

"You figure the Lord done it?" Delmar wanted to know.

"Seems awful hard the Lord'd zap the likes of old Custis and pay no attention to Marshall Burke." Marshall was a tackle for the Booneville Commandos who had once stomped on Stoney's hand after the fourth-quarter whistle blew.

"I don't know — them Tuttles never seem to come to no good end." The Jenkses and the Tuttles hadn't spoken to each other since the Tuttles voted Republican in the election of '36.

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"Some think it was the UFO people. Custis was always going on about them. I'm going to his place to see what I can find out."

Delmar fueled up a boat while his dog peed on Stoney's right front tire. Tied up at the little wharf was Custis's old rowboat that he'd used to bring in everything he needed. It was a long way to row, so Custis had hardly ever come into town more than once or twice a week, and not that often in winter.

Stoney started the boat up, and as he pulled away from the wharf, he wondered just what he was going up there for. It was not like he'd ever been close to Custis. It wasn't even that Custis had asked him up to the place to show him something. He decided it was mainly because he wanted to take a cruise up the lake one last time before going off into the navy and starting a new life. And maybe also because it seemed a man just shouldn't blow up, especially not right in front of the only bar in town.

The lake was pretty, even if nothing lived in it for very long. The wind ruffled his hair, and Stoney ran his fingers through it, remembering that the navy was going to cut most of it off. It was black and silky, on account of there was a lot of Cherokee blood in his family. The little motor putt-putted along so slowly and quietly that it always seemed to be on the verge of stalling, but it never did.

Just below Custis's place, he nosed the boat into the tiny cove and tied the painter to the same willow where Custis had always tied up his rowboat. Stoney estimated he was about fifty yards north and forty feet above his grandfather's old apple orchard. The path was narrow but well-worn, snaking up around a big boulder where an Indian ghost was supposed to live.

The cabin looked like always, a neatly made log house with white-painted chinking and the county's first satellite-dish antenna standing next to it. He saw that the onions in the garden patch were coming along nicely. Custis always had kept a presentable garden.

He didn't expect the door would be locked, and it wasn't. Nobody in these parts had ever heard of locking a door until about ten years before, and Custis's place was so remote that he wouldn't bother. Stoney went on in. The cabin was cluttered in an orderly fashion, with lots of charts and pictures on the walls, and there were books, magazines, pamphlets, and papers scattered all over. Mr. Chinnery, the postmaster, said that Custis got more publications from more funny-sounding places than any five other boxes in the place.

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There was a big reflector telescope aimed skyward out the biggest window.

There was some kind of radio set covering most of one wall, and in front of that was a bulky, old-fashioned microphone just like the one Franklin D. Roosevelt was talking into in the photograph in Stoney's eleventh-grade U.S. history textbook. There were wires and cables looping everywhere, connecting the radio, the TV, the telescope, and the satellite antenna all together. It looked like Custis had been supporting the local Radio Shack all by himself for five, six years.

He glanced at the fronts of some of the books and pamphlets. A bunch of them were about the Nazis in Argentina and their UFO bases in the Antarctic. There was a lot on the international bankers' conspiracy and how to live through the coming anarchy. One of the maps on the wall had a lot of lines connecting places labeled Stonehenge, the Pyramids, the Nazca Plain, and others Stoney had heard of, along with several he hadn't, and most of the lines worked their way down to the Antarctic somehow. It looked like old Custis had had the Antarctic on the brain, for sure. What he couldn't figure out was how all this led up to a blue bolt zapping out of the sky and blowing Custis all over an ordinarily quiet coal-mining community.

Stoney went over to the little icebox and took out a cold Coors and sat down to think. Stoney was young, and he was neither experienced nor well-traveled. On the other hand, he was reasonably educated and intelligent, and he could recognized insane drivel when he saw it. All these publications read the way Custis had talked, and the whole mess didn't amount to a mediocre episode of "In Search Of." No, there had to be something else.

He got up and switched on the television. A game show sprang to life, and a woman in a low-cut sequined dress flipped over cards while the camera's field of view stayed firmly centered on her cleavage. Leaving the set on, he went to the big radio set. There was a power switch, and he flipped it on. There was a buzz and crackle, but nothing else. He noticed a little box on the table in front of the set. It had a dial set into its wooden face, and, around the circumference of the dial, Custis had stuck strips of colored plastic tape embossed with numbers and lettering. There was a blue one that said "666," and one that said "BBC 4," and another that said "WBRC–Hard Rock." None of that looked promising. Then he saw a

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yellow strip that said "UFO People." He turned the dial to that one. A big hum resonated through the whole cabin.

There was a lot of crackle then, and some voice saying things in broken, jagged sentences and strings of numbers. It was English, though. Then a voice came across that was speaking as plain as any Stoney'd ever heard.

"Crap! It's him again."

"Impossible," said another voice, in that tone Stoney had learned to recognize from movies about people ramrodding air traffic. "Target subject code name Alpha Five was reported successfully terminated yesterday at 2000 hours Zulu time."

"Then somebody screwed up!" said the first voice, the excited one. "He's back again, and he's screwed up about six months' worth of tests with that rogue beam."

"That is about to cease." This was a third voice, a really grim one, that sounded about the way Stoney had always thought a hangman's voice should sound. "Primary weapon test number ninety-three commencing. Firing sequence begun. Ten, nine, eight —"

Stoney figured that was his signal to leave. He was out of the cabin and down the path in long jumps, and he was already casting the painter loose when the blue beam took off half the hillside and dropped the Indian ghost rock into the lake fifty feet away, almost swamping the boat.

ELEVEN MONTHS later Stoney was near the Antarctic. Actually, he was now Apprentice Seaman Stonewall Jackson Griffon, serving aboard the U.S.S. *John Wayne*. He had deck watch, and there was nothing to see except the absolutely featureless shore a few miles away and an occasional iceberg. There were men aboard who swore that this run was worse than Amarillo in a blue norther.

It wasn't that Stoney had forgotten Custis's warning. He had specifically said that he didn't want to go to the Antarctic. It was just that the navy didn't give a big rat's ass what you wanted. He was standing there, slowly turning to ice, with his hands jammed into his pockets and his watch cap pulled down over his ears, when Shorty Garcia came out to relieve him.

"Old Man wants to see you in his office," Shorty told him.

Stoney left the deck gratefully and made his way to the Old Man's door. He rapped on it and went in when he was told to, taking his cap off as he did. At least on this ship, they weren't demons for saluting.

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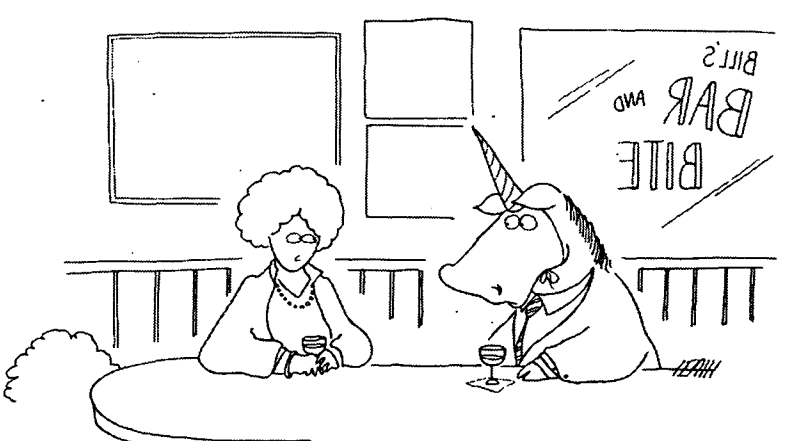
"Griffon?" The Old Man was either twenty-five or fifty or somewhere in between. "We just got some transmissions in about new assignments. You remember you tested for the, ah, let's see, the Space Defense Program back at Great Lakes? Well, it looks like your scores were high, because you've been accepted. Jesus, this assignment's so secret I had to take the transmission myself. Congratulations, Griffon. Where did you hear about this program? I never even knew about it."

"I asked around at Great Lakes, sir. Always had a notion to get into the space program."

"Well, it's probably better than serving here in the southern latitudes. As soon as we hit a port, you'll be flown to wherever they're training the next generation of naval personnel." He looked like he thought he'd been left out of something.

Stoney went back out on deck. His watch was over, but he didn't want to get into some bull session with the other guys. He watched the waves hissing on the bleak shore, and wondered if there were really any Nazi UFO bases inland somewhere. He didn't think so.

One thing was for sure, though. The Griffons and the Tuttles were kin, and there were going to be some sorry bastards up there pretty soon.



"Our relationship is built on deceit, Morris. I'm not a virgin, and that's not a real horn on your head."

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In which Mad Amos Malone, passing through North Texas on his way to Colorado, encounters some Indian spirits and something even stranger . . .

The Chrome Comanche

By Alan Dean Foster

ESAU WAS CHECKING the wagon's rear axle, when the dog started barking. It was the middle of the day, and it made no sense. The dog ought to be asleep somewhere back of the barn, not out front barking in the sun. In any event, it stopped soon enough. The dog was as exhausted as the rest of them.

At first he didn't even bother to look up, so absorbed was he in his study of the wagon. It had to be loaded and ready to go by this evening, so they wouldn't have to spend another night in the cabin. It wasn't much of a house, but it was a home, a beginning. Rock and sod, mostly, braced with rough-cut cedar and mesquite. What milled lumber he'd been able to afford had gone into the barn. It wasn't finished, and the chicken house wasn't finished.

The only thing that was finished here on the south bank of the Red River was them, he thought.

He didn't raise his gaze until the dog came over and begin licking him.

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"What the blazes ails you, hound?"

"He's scared, I think," said a deep voice. "I hope not of me."

Esau hesitated, then realized that the wagon offered little protection. Might as well crawl out and confront the speaker, whoever he might be. Were they now to have as little peace during the day as they'd found here at night?

No spirit gazed back at him, though the animal the speaker rode was unusual enough. Esau knew horses, but this particular mount appeared more jumbled than mixed. The rider was nearly as unclassifiable, though from what could be seen behind the flowing black beard, Esau was pretty sure he was white. Esau had to squint to make out individual features. The more he squinted, the more indefinable the details of that face seemed to become. Though it was as full of lines as a sloping field after a storm, it didn't hint of great age.

The man himself was immense. The pupils of his eyes were of a blackness extreme enough to spill over and stain the whites. He wore fringed boots and buckskin, his attire not so much dirty as eroded. Like the face, Esau thought. Had man put those lines there, or nature? Bandoliers of huge cartridges crisscrossed his chest, fuel for the Sharps buffalo rifle slung next to the saddle. The octagonal barrel was only slightly smaller than a telegraph pole.

"You're a long ways from the mountains, friend." Esau shielded his eyes as he spoke, while the dog began to sniff around the horse's hooves. The confused-breed piebald ignored the attention. "No beaver to trap around here. Not in north Texas."

"You'd be surprised what there is to trap in Texas." The mountain man considered the little cabin. "But you're right enough. I'm jest passin' through, out o' New Orleans on my way to Colorado." He nodded in the direction of the chimney. "Saw your smoke."

A vast growl arose from the vicinity of the giant's stomach, belly-thunder heralding the approach of an expansive hunger. Esau smiled slightly, relaxing.

"You're welcome here, stranger. Come in and set a spell. Be right to have company for our last meal here."

Though the giant slipped off his mount, he seemed to lose nothing in stature as he stood on his own two feet. "I thank you for your hospitality. Your last meal, you say?"

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Esau nodded gravely, indicated the wagon. "Just checking out the frame and the springs before loading her up. Never thought I'd have to do that again. We'd planned to live out our days here. This is a good place, mister. River's always running, and the grass is high. Best cattle country I ever saw." He shrugged fatalistically.

The mountain man addressed the uncomfortable silence. "Name's Malone. Amos Malone."

"Esau Weaver." The rancher's hand vanished inside the giant's gnarled grasp. "Sarah's inside fixin' dinner. You're welcome to stay for supper, too, if it suits you. We'll be out soon after. Have to be."

"It ain't in me to linger long in any one place, but I appreciate your offer, Weaver."

Esau led the visitor toward the home he was preparing to flee, unable to keep from glancing at his companion. "Didn't think there were any of you boys left. Thought the beaver had all been trapped out, and the market for 'em faded anyways."

"There's still places in the backcountry where a feller can make a livin' if he works hard and has half a mind for figures. Only real trouble's that the country's gettin' too citified. Even Colorado's fillin' up with folks tired of city life." He chuckled, an extraordinary sound. "So naturally, soon as they arrive, they all light out for Denver. Folks sure are a puzzlement sometimes."

"Wish all I had to deal with were country neighbors." Esau opened the door and called to alert his wife. Malone had to duck double to clear the low doorway.

Behind them the dog concluded its inspection and disdainfully peed on the horse's rear right leg, whereupon the mountain man's mount did a most unequine thing. It raised its leg and liked to drown that poor unsuspecting hound, sending it shaking and yapping around the back of the cabin. The horse, whose name was Useless, let out a soft snort of satisfaction and went hunting for fodder. Malone had not tied him. Would've been useless to try.

Sarah Weaver showed the lack of sleep the family had endured recently. She wore her hair pulled straight back and secured in a small bun, a simple long-sleeved dress, and an apron decorated with fine tatting. She hardly glanced at her husband and his guest. Her son, Jeremiah, was far less inhibited. He stared unabashedly at Malone, firing questions that the

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mountain man answered readily until the boy's mother warned him to mind his manners.

"Heck, ma'am, he don't bother me none," said Malone with a smile so ready and wide that the tense woman relaxed. "It's good to be around young'uns. Reminds a man what the future's for."

"I then take it that you're not married, sir?" She dipped stew from the black cast-iron kettle that hung in the fireplace. Once things got settled, Esau had promised her a real stove, but now. . . .

"Name's Malone, ma'am. As for lockin' up, I've had the urge once or twice, but as I ain't the type to settle down, it wouldn't be fair to the woman."

"I hope you like this stew." She set the bowl in front of the visitor. "It's all we have. What's left of all I could I salvage from my garden before *they* destroyed it."

Malone inhaled pointedly. "Ambrosia and nectar, ma'am. Though if you cleaned out your barn an' boiled the results, it'd be bound to be better than my own cookin'."

She smiled thinly and sat down opposite her husband. Jeremiah took the high seat opposite Malone.

An unnatural silence settled over the table. Any slight creak or groan caused both rancher and wife to look tensely at walls or windows before resuming their meal. There eventually came time when Malone could stand it no longer.

"Now, you folks tell me to shut my food hole if you want to, but I'm afflicted with a confusion I got to vent. Friend Esau, you told me what a fine place you had here, and havin' seen some of it, I don't find any reason to dispute. So maybe you'll sympathize with an ignorant bumpkin who sits here delightin' in your wife's fine cooking while wonderin' why you're in such an all-fired rush to leave?"

Esau Weaver glanced at his wife, who said nothing. He started to resume eating, then paused as though considering whether to speak. Clearly it burned within him to share this matter with someone else.

"Spirits, Mr. Malone." The rancher broke a chunk of bread from the round loaf in the middle of the table. "Ghosts. Devils. Indian devils."

"They come upon us in the middle of the night, Mr. Malone." Sarah Weaver had her hands on the table, the fingers twisting and twining. "Horrible sounds they make. They terrify Jeremiah. They terrify me."

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"Got no heads." Weaver was chewing his bread unenthusiastically, but he needed something to do with his mouth and hands. "Thought it was just raiders at first, till I got a look at 'em during a full moon. No heads at all. That don't keep 'em from howling and yelling and tearing up the place. They want us off this land, and by God, they're going to have their way. I can't take any more of this, and neither can the woman." Love filled his eyes as he gazed across the table at his wife, love and despair. "White men or Indians I'd fight, but not things without heads."

"Esau went into town and spoke with one of the pacified Comanche medicine men," Sarah Weaver murmured. "He told Esau that this part of the country along the river was sacred to the tribe. But he couldn't say how much. He did say there could be spirits here."

"There are spirits all over this country," Malone said. "Some places don't matter so much to 'em. Others do." He sat back in his chair, and it creaked alarmingly. "But you were told straight, I think. This lands reeks of medicine, old medicine. But not," he added, his face twisting in puzzlement, "this place right here."

"You know about such things, do you, Mr. Malone?" Esau's tone was sardonic.

"A mite. I sensed the medicine when I was ridin' in. But not where we're sittin'. If there's spirits about, I wouldn't see them choosin' this place for a frolic. Upstream or down, maybe, but not right here. Besides which, it ain't like spirits to drive off cattle and tear up vegetables. If they're real and they wanted you off, they'd be a sight more direct in their intentions."

"They're real enough, Mr. Malone," said Sarah Weaver. "If you don't believe us, stay and see for yourself, if you dare."

"Well, now, ma'am, I jest might do that. Been awhile since I seen a gen-u-wine spirit. Oh, and that Comanche medicine man you talked to? He might've been right or he might've been wrong, but one thing's sure: he weren't pacified. You don't pacify the Comanche. They jest got plumb tuckered-out." He glancēd at his host.

"Now, you say these here no-heads keep y'all awake a-yellin' and a-hollerin'. Do they sound somethin' like this?" Somewhere behind that wolf thicket of a beard, lips parted as Malone began to chant.

Jeremiah's jaw dropped as he stared in awe, while his parents sat stock-still, listening. Night not due for hours seemed to encroach on the little cabin, and a breeze probed curiously where moments earlier the

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air had been still as a bad man's eulogy.

"That about right?" Malone inquired.

Esau shook himself back to alertness. "Something like that, but deeper, long syllables."

Malone tried again. "Closer?"

Sarah Weaver found herself nodding unwillingly. "That's it, Mr. Malone. That's it exactly."

"Interestin'. First chant was Comanche. Second was Shoshone. Now, the Comanche and the Shoshones are related, but there ain't no love lost between the tribes, and there ain't no Shoshone in these parts. Too far east, too far south. Makes no sense."

"Neither do headless devils, Mr. Malone."

The mountain man nodded somberly at the rancher's wife. "That's a truth fine as frog hair, ma'am. The devils I know always keep their heads about them, if not their wits. A head's something man or spirit tends to get used to, and downright lonely without.

"You said they're about to run you off this land, but all they've done is make your lives more miserable than north Texas weather?"

"Maybe you're not afraid of devils, Mr. Malone, but I have a family to protect. I'll take no chances with something I do not understand."

"I comprehend your position, Esau. You're a good man in a bad spot. Now, a fool like myself loves to take chances with what he don't understand. Mrs. Weaver, I will take you up on your offer to stay and see for myself. But I don't fancy doin' so all by my lonesome. You've stuck it out this long. Could you see your way clear to stickin' around one more night? If my suspicions are wrong, I'll be the first to up an' confess my sins."

"Another night?" Sarah Weaver's exhaustion showed in her tone and expression. "I don't know. What would be the good in it?"

"Might not be any good in it, ma'am." Malone didn't mince words with her. "Might be only understanding, and that ain't always to the good. But I've got a hunch it ain't your place the spirits hereabouts are concerned with."

Esau Weaver leaned forward. "Then you believe there are spirits here?"

"Didn't I say that? This is old Comanche land. Lot of coups counted here, lot of warriors' bones interred along this river. What I said was, I don't see why they'd bear you folks any malice. You ain't even turnin' the soil."

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"Why should you want to help us? You said you were just passing through."

"That's my life, Esau. Passin' through. The time to stop's when good people like yourselves are havin' trouble. It's what we do in the passin' that's remembered." He beamed at Sarah Weaver, and despite her exhaustion, she surprised herself by blushing. "Notwithstandin' that I owe you for the best meal I've had since leavin' New Orleans."

Weaver was wrestling with himself. His mind had been made up for days. He would not go so far as to allow himself to hope, but this towering stranger was so damned sure of things.

He glanced one last time at his wife, who acquiesced with her eyes. Then he turned back to Malone. "You mind sleepin' in the barn with the horses?"

"Not if the horses don't object. Uh, you got any mares in heat?"

Weaver made a face. "No. Why would you ask that?"

"Don't want to cause a ruckus." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the door. "Useless may not look like much, but he's able to do more than trot when his back's up."

"I'll find you some blankets, Mr. Malone." Sarah Weaver started to rise from the table.

"Now, never you mind me, missus. I've got my own blanket. Buffalo robe's good enough for me. Warmer than homespun, and strong enough to keep the mosquitoes away."

"Thick pile, is it?" Weaver inquired.

"Not especial. But it ain't been washed in a bit, and the smell's strong enough to mask my own."

Jeremiah gazed wide-eyed at the mountain man. "What if the headless spirits come for you, Mr. Malone? What if they come for you in the barn when you're asleep and all alone?"

That huge wrinkled face bent close. The boy could smell the plains and the mountains, the sea and suggestions of far-off places. For just an instant, those black eyes seemed to shine with a light of their own, and Jeremiah Weaver was sure he could see unnameable things reflected within them.

"Why, then, son, we'll have ourselves a set-to and gamble for souls or answers."

Malone guessed it was around two in the morning when Useless's

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cold, wet tongue slapped against his face. Grunting, the mountain man swatted at the persistent protuberance as he sat up in the darkness, hunting for his boots.

"Godforsaken miserable son-of-spavined mule, can't let a man get a decent sleep." Useless snorted, turned toward his waiting saddle and blanket.

"No, you stay here." Malone hop-danced into one boot, then its mate. "Bright night like this, you'd stick out like Tom Sawyer's fence. I won't be too long. Meanwhile, you leave those two mares alone. They ain't interested in you, nohow."

As Malone traipsed out of the barn in the direction of the faint sounds, his mount stuck out his tongue at him. Then Useless turned to begin chewing at the rope that secured the paddock gate.

There was ample moon, though Malone didn't need it. He could track them by their movements. They were chanting already, but softly, as if practicing. Peculiar and peculiar. Spirits didn't need rehearsals, and it was hard to imagine any Indian, real or ghostly, crashing through the brush like a runaway mine cart.

But there were spirits here. That he knew. So he continued to tread silently.

Then he could see them. There were about a dozen, advancing slowly on the cabin, crouching as they walked. They wore painted vests and leggings and, just as the Weavers insisted, had no heads.

Maybe that explained why they were so clumsy, Malone thought. Spirits floated. Comanche floated, almost. These critters, whatever they were, bulled their way through the brush.

Only one of them was chanting louder than a whisper. Malone focused on him. There was something about the way he moved that was real. His feet caressed the earth instead of bludgeoning it, and he wore moccasins. His companion spirits wore boots. A few were equipped with spurs. Odd choice of footgear for a ghost.

The crackling anger of a thousand crickets made Malone look down and to his left. The snake was already tightly coiled. So intent had he been on observing the advancing "spirits" that he'd neglected to note the leathery one close by his feet.

The rattler's tongue flicked in Malone's direction. Malone's tongue jabbed right back. If it had any sense, the rattler would bluster a few

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seconds more, and then slither off among the grass. Snakes, however, were notoriously short on sense. This one struck, aiming for Malone's left leg.

The mountain man disliked killing anything without good reason, and the snake's unwarranted attack was evidence enough it was already deranged. So, instead of drawing the bowie knife, Malone spat, faster and more accurately than was natural. His spit caught the snake in the eyes as its target leaped to one side.

Confused and queasy, the rattler lay silent a moment. Then it hurried off into the brush. It would not come back.

Unfortunately, it had been heard. Four headless figures surrounded Malone. All of them carried Colts, distinctly unethereal devices. The man in their midst regarded them thoughtfully.

"Didn't think you'd chance it forever on your singin' alone."

The one nearest Malone reached up and yanked at his chest. Painted fabric slid downward in his fingers, revealing a quite normal face. At the moment the expression on it was pained.

"You're a big one. Where'd you spring from?"

"The seed of an eagle and the loins of a cat — not that it's any of your business." Malone studied his captors thoughtfully as the speaker carefully removed bowie knife and LeMat pistol from the mountain man's person. Malone made no move to retain them. "What're you boys doin' out here in the middle o' the night in those getups? I didn't know the circus had made it this far West."

The speaker's expression turned sour. He was about to reply, when two other figures arrived. Those holding the Colts quickly made room for the newcomers. One of them was the real chanter. Malone studied his features intently. Shoshone, all right. Teetering the horizontal side of half-drunk, and by the look of him, not caring much about his condition.

His companion was bigger, older, and made up to look like what he wasn't. He was neither ghost nor spirit, though the scent of the Devil was surely about him, He had about him the air of one with no time to waste, clearly a man poisoned by impatience.

"Who the hell are you?" he inquired belligerently of the mountain man.

"Malone's the name. Amos Malone. Mad Amos to some."

"That I can believe. Well, Mr. Malone, I don't know what you're doing out here, but I am told that the country on the north side of the river is more hospitable to strangers. I would suggest that you betake your-

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self there as soon as possible. Perhaps sooner."

"Your solicitude is touching, but I like it here, Mister. . . ?"

"Cleator. This is my associate, Mr. Little-Bear-Blind-in-One-Eye." He clasped the Shoshone possessively on the shoulder. It was enough to shake his none-too-stable equilibrium.

Malone murmured something in Shoshone to the chanter, who promptly and unexpectedly straightened. He blinked hard, as if fighting with his own eyes, trying to focus on the man who'd spoken to him. Meanwhile, the mountain man gestured at those surrounding him.

"Kind of an obscure locale for a theatrical performance, ain't it?"

"This is not theater, sir. This is seriously real."

"Might I inquire as to its purpose?"

Cleator gazed at him. "Why should I trouble myself to explain to a passing nonentity? Why should I not simply have you shot?"

"Because you don't want any shooting." Malone indicated the still-sleeping cabin. "If that's what you wanted, you'd have killed all three Weavers long ago instead of constructin' this elaborate masque."

"You are surprisingly perceptive. I am intrigued. You are, of course, quite right. I dislike killing because dead people cannot sign legal documents. It is much better for them to sign willingly, while they are still alive."

"This is all because you have a hankerin' for the Weavers' land."

"Certainly. It lies between two of my holdings. But that is not the most important reason." He paused, studying Malone, and then shrugged. "I will show you. Understanding will make you dangerous to me. Then I will have no compunctions about having you shot if you refuse to depart."

They led him to the edge of the Red. Little Bear followed, but stayed as far away from Malone as possible. He was still fighting to focus his eyes.

Cleator pointed upstream, then down, and lastly at the far side of the river. "My land, Mr. Malone." He kicked dirt with his boots. "Weaver's land. Notice anything unique about it?"

Malone studied the river, the far bank and the near. "This is a narrows."

Cleator smiled, pleased. "Very good, sir. Very good, indeed. I may tell you that, in fact, this is the narrowest part of the Red River for many miles in either direction. Can you suspect why it is of such interest to me?"

"You need a bridge."

"Running cattle across a bridge saves the need of fording them to reach

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the railhead north of here. Every extra mile a steer runs costs weight, and therefore money. I need this land to build my bridge."

"Why not simply lease the portion you need? I'm sure Weaver would be amenable to a fair offer. A bridge could be of benefit to his stock as well."

"Of course it would, but I don't want to benefit his stock, Mr. Malone. Nor do I wish the uncertainty of a lease. I want to own it all."

"You're goin' to all this trouble for that?"

"No trouble, Mr. Malone. I invent some mischievous spirits to frighten away the Weavers, and then I buy their land at auction."

"If you jest asked him, he might be glad to sell out direct."

"But in this fashion, I obtain a much better price."

Malone considered. "Mr. Cleator, you are an evil man."

Cleator shrugged. "I am ambitious. They are not the same."

"I find it hard to separate the two, much of the time. Joke's on you, though."

The rancher frowned. "What joke, sir?"

"You didn't have to invent no spirits to haunt this place. The spirits are here already. Have been for a thousand years or more." He turned sharply on Little Bear. "Ain't that right?" And he added something in Shoshone.

As wide as the chanter's eyes got, this time they had no difficulty in focusing. Little Bear began to gaze nervously around him. Ordinary rocks and bushes suddenly caused him to retreat, to stumble.

"What did you say to him?" asked Cleator curiously.

"Nothin' he don't know. The whiskey you give him kept his eyes from workin', if not his mouth. He's seein' now, takin' a good look around, and he don't much like what he sees. Always been bad blood between Shoshones and Comanche. He's feelin' dead Comanche around him now, and he don't care for it. I wouldn't neither, were I you, Mr. Cleator."

A couple of the hired gunmen were starting to glance around uneasily. Malone had started them thinking. North Texas is a bad place for a man to be thinking with the moon glaring down at him accusingly.

"Really? And why not? Am I suppoed to fear a few dead Indians?"

"I'm jest sayin' that if I were you, I wouldn't try to put no bridge over these narrows."

Cleator was grinning now, enjoying himself. "Mr. Malone, you are a caution, sir. I defy the Weavers, I defy the Comanche, and I defy their dead or anything else that attempts to slow progress on this land. Do not

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try to frighten me with my own invention."

"Sometimes it's healthy to be a mite afeared o' progress, Mr. Cleator. It can jump up when you ain't lookin' an' bite you severe." He looked up suddenly at the opposite bank, his heavy brows drawing together like a small black version of the bridge Cleator proposed to build.

The gunmen jumped when Little Bear let out a cry and bolted. One of them raised his weapon, but Cleator stopped him from shooting.

"Let him go. We'll track him down later. He'll be in town, drunk."

"I wouldn't figure too near on that," Malone informed him. "I think our friend's seen the light. I reckon by tomorrow he'll be headed northwest, if he can find himself a horse. You see, he saw what was waitin' for him here, and did the sensible thing by lightin' out."

One of Cleator's men stepped forward. "We're losin' the night, boss." A very large knife gleamed in his right hand. "Let me stick him, and we'll dump him in the river and get on with this."

"Very well. Now that he knows, by his own wish, he is a threat, and as previously stated, I can have no compunction about terminating a threat. Therefore, you may. . . ."

He broke off, gazing across the river at the spot Malone was watching. One by one, the men wielding the Colts joined him in staring.

"Hell's bunghole," one of them stuttered, "what is *that*?"

It was larger than a bull buffalo, with teeth the size of an opium dream, and burning yellow eyes. Even at that distance, you could hear it growl as it raced toward them.

"Mr. Cleator, I wouldn't linger in this vicinity if I were you."

The rancher was shaken but otherwise unmoved. "I am not afraid of night beasts, Mr. Malone. That is no spirit. I don't know what it is, but if it is alive, it can be slain." He wrenched a rifle from the man next to him. "This will be my land, and I will build my bridge *here*. I will deal with any intruders." He glanced back and smiled. "You set this up, didn't you? You and the Weavers. Some kind of trick. It will not work. I am no gullible plainsman, sir. And you are dogmeat." He looked sharply at the man with the knife.

"Stick him or shoot him, as you please."

But the gunman was staring across the river, staring at the unbelievable thing that was coming toward them faster than a train could travel. As he stared, he kept backing up, until he prudently decided to turn and run. He was accompanied.

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Cleator roared at them. "Come back! You cowards, idiots! Can't you see it's a trick! That damn farmer will be laughing at you tomorrow!"

A couple of the men slowed to turn, but what they saw made them tremble with fear and run faster still. The monster reached the far bank of the river. It did not stop, but kept coming, soaring through the night air as easily as the fabled roc of legend, as cleanly as a bad dream. They were not particularly brave, those men, and they were not being paid well enough to stay and tussle with Hell.

The scream made Cleator turn. So fast had it traversed the river gorge that it was already almost upon him. It screamed again, a cross between a bleat and a howl. Malone whirled to flee, yelling at Cleator to do the same.

Perhaps he didn't have enough time, or chose to react instinctively. He raised his rifle and tried to aim.

The burning yellow eyes blinded him. He flung his gun aside and tried finally to dodge.

That was when Malone saw the Indian. He was riding the monster's muzzle.

It was solid and yet spirit, a brave clad in untraditional armor. Small but perfect, he thought as it turned toward the stumbling, half-paralyzed rancher and loosed a single shining arrow. It struck James Cleator squarely in the right eye, penetrating to the brain and killing him instantly.

Then the monster was upon him. Cleator was struck once and sent flying, his already-dead broken body landing ten yards away in a crumpled heap. Malone slowed. It had not come after him, but had vanished eastward, howling into the night.

Breathing hard, he waited until he was sure before returning to study the rancher's corpse. Nearby he found the monster's tracks. They were unlike any he'd ever seen. He knelt to examine them more closely.

A voice anxious from behind: "Mr. Malone! Are you all right, sir?"

The mountain man did not look up as Esau Weaver slowed to a halt beside him. The rancher was carrying a rifle, old and battered. There was nothing worn about his courage, however. He blanched when he espied Cleator's body.

"I know that man."

"Your antagonist, though you did not know it. Not spirits. Gold will buy a man much, but not truth, and not the spirits of the dead. Too easy by half to defile yesterday as well as tomorrow. I believe he were done in

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by both." He put a comforting hand on the rancher's shoulder. "Nothin' more to be done here. Cleator was dead of heart before the rest of his body caught up with him. Let's go get some shut-eye. I'll have a go at explainin' it all to you and the missus tomorrow, while I'm helpin' y'all to unpack."

Weaver nodded wordlessly. Together they returned to the cabin, which would be no more disturbed. Around them the land and all it contained was once again at rest. Yesterday and tomorrow slept peacefully, flanking the present.

"Hell of a restoration job." The attendant looked on approvingly.

"Thanks." The owner was standing before the object of the other man's admiration, examining it minutely.

"Something happened; I can see that."

"Hit something coming over the bridge last night, just this side of Childress. Might've been a coyote. Might've been a small deer."

"Lot of damage?" The attendant was sympathetic. Out here you never knew what you might run into at night.

"Not as bad as it felt. Plenty of blood, though. That'll wash off O.K. Then there's this." He fingered the Packard's nose. "Bent halfway around. And there's a little arrow that went right here, see? Must've lost it in the collision." He straightened, shaking his head sadly.

"These cars from the thirties and forties, they built 'em tough, but it seems like something's always happening to the damn hood ornaments."

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 40: *In Which We Scrutinize the Sedulousness to Their Hippocratic Oath of Troglodytic, Blue, Alien Proctologists*

MY WIFE ASSURES me she will leave me if I don't trash this movie.

Never has my marriage been on firmer ground. The film at hand is COMMUNION (New Line Cinema), with a screenplay by the bestselling author Whitley Strieber, based on his bestselling book of the same title. Produced by the bestselling author Whitley Strieber in conjunction with Dan Allingham and the director, Philippe Mora, *Communion* stars three of my favorite thesps, Christopher Walken (portraying the bestselling author Whitley Strieber), Lindsay Crouse, and Frances Sternhagen.

You will notice I referred to the tome COMMUNION as "the bestselling book" and not as "the bestselling novel" or "the bestselling non-fiction work." To have employed the former categorization would have been to risk inflaming a substantial portion of the readership of COMMUNION, who have bought more than 2,300,000 copies of Mr. Strieber's book and who believe it is gospel, every word absolutely true, the real thing, and in no way a work of fiction. To have assigned to COMMUNION the latter designation would have been to incur the wrath of the uncounted *other* millions who have, or have not, read Mr. Strieber's literary offerings, who are convinced that the bestselling Mr. Strieber is, if not certifiably bugfuck, at minimum one of the most accomplished liars who ever stuck it to, and rotated it, and broke it off inside, the American Publishing Industry.

Because I am the product of sweet reason, a man steeped in fairness and evenhandedness, I choose to sidestep the issue. I will refer to Mr. Strieber's bestselling book as

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"book" and leave the pamphleteering to the more passionate.

But before we get to the subtext of the issue at hand, let me render for you a detailed synopsis of this fillum. (And to those who justifiably decry the brutish practice of "spilling the beans" of a film's plot — a nasty bit of business practiced by far too many reviewers, a practice I have eschewed to the point where critics of WATCHING have accused me of "being vague about storyline" — let me assure you I'm not drifting into bad habits. At least not *this* bad habit. There is no great mystery revealed at the denouement of *Communion*; no shock surprise; no revelation that the serial killer is, indeed, Jeff Bridges come to murder Glenn Close; no ironic twist that shows Charlton Heston on his knees weeping at the ruined icon of the Statue of Liberty. If there is any mystery about *Communion* I submit it is how the film managed to get even the few laudatory comments it did.) So here's the story, front to back, *in toto*.

It is just before Halloween, 1985. Bestselling author Whitley Strieber is in the advanced stages of writer's block. To take his mind off his problem, he and his wife, Anne (Lindsey Crouse), and their seven-year-old, Andrew (Joel Carson), spend a weekend absenting themselves from the hurly-burly of Manhattan at Strieber's mountain cabin. Neither in the book nor in the movie are we told exactly where this situs of forthcoming bizarre events exists. In the book Mr. Strieber is careful to avoid disclosing this bit of information. We are told only that the cabin is in "a secluded corner of upstate New York."

The Striebers have asked a pair of close friends to share the bucolic weekend. But in the night, there are these . . . well, how to describe them . . . the studio pr handout refers to them as "nocturnal disturbances" . . . George Carlin would call it "weird shit" . . . the wind blows, the branches scrape the roof, mercury-vapor light blasts through windows, a roaring can be heard . . . it's all very vague and open to interpretation, all this hugger-mugger; but whatever it is, it is (in the words of the studio synopsis):

". . . so frightening that another couple, invited as guests, demand to leave early. While Whitley has no clear memory of what happened that October night, the unspoken fear turns this loving, vulnerable man into a sullen, hypersensitive shadow of his former self."

As far as I could tell, this loving, vulnerable man only became further surfeited with facial and conversational tics, as interpreted by Mr. Walken. I missed the sullen, hypersensitive shadow part. He just

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seemed to act a little weirder than he had from the outset. But I digress. Or perhaps I don't. Who knows? It's all in the interpretation, as who among us is not.

Anyhow, bestselling Whitley keeps getting more bizarro.

Loving and vulnerable becomes progressively more sullen and shadowedly hypersensitive until, during a trick-or-treat outing in their condo, he mistakes a little girl in costume for . . . well, it's all very vague and open to interpretation as to *what* he thinks she is. But he gets seriously uncool and gibbers at her quite a bit, screaming and hopping about, and otherwise letting us know that this loving, vulnerable man has begun to perceive a worm of psychosis in his psychic apple.

But undaunted by the disturbing turns his previously loving and vulnerable personality has taken (the technical, psychiatric term professionals use is *freaky*), Whitley and his wife and son return to that "secluded corner of upstate New York" for the Christmas holiday. Not a smart move.

(Have you ever noticed that one of the staples of predictable cliché horror stories is that people we are asked to believe are sane and rational *always* rush back to the scene of some unspeakable nightmare? They can't wait to plunge headfirst into that abyss, lose their shoes dashing back into the Amityville house, ignore all warnings not to re-enter the poltergeist-ridden nursery, knock each other down getting back to the graveyard. I don't know about you, but I suggest that this trope be retired. Either that, or make it clear that these are protagonists who operate with diminished mental capacity.)

Anyhow, as expected, Whitley has another run-in with the ambiguously-presented "nocturnal disturbances" on the night after Christmas. Had this taken place in England, it would have been Boxing Day. But I digress. Or perhaps I don't. (One does tend to feel cast adrift as the film progresses. We are left to our own devices to ascertain precisely what's going on. And you know how dangerous it can be to leave us to our own devices.)

Whitley begins either to a) have a series of bad dreams about alien visitors or b) is actually being beset by alien visitors. Or c) is acting-out the plot of his next book.

These extraterrestrials come in several shapes. The first are variants on the vaseline-smeared-lens vision of non-humans from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* You know: triangular heads, faintly metallic looking, slitty little eyes; the sort of kindergarten drawings baby tots make when they wanna show you the oogy-boogy monster. Then there

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are these gnomelike, blue trogs in monk's habits, who scuttle about like Munchkins on a break from Oz, trying to find the Cub Room at the MGM commissary. And I vaguely remember a third species, something hairy and bearlike, but I could be wrong. It was all so vague and open to personal interpretation, and let us not forget our own devices, still on the loose and confusing us. But it's the asexual slitty-eyed aliens, with their masklike faces, and the blue troglodytes who dominate Whitley's descent into paradoxical behavior. The mask aliens seem to be the big bosses and the Billy Barty-sized blue friars seem to work for them in a medical/technical capacity.

So Whitley bounces off the walls in the cabin, getting progressively more unhinged, until he caps his encounter by almost blowing away wife Anne with a shotgun. Understandably, this causes pique in Anne, and she tells bestselling hubby that he is putting a strain on their marriage by almost wasting her, by frightening neighbors, by alarming their son, and in general acting like a horror novelist who has been unable to write.

Incidentally . . . though most writers won't tip to this, what Whitley was undergoing is very much commonplace for us writers. As my wife said to me, the last time I leveled a Winchester 101 over/under 12-gauge at her, "I take it very much amiss that just because you're late with your script you have unleashed both barrels of that surrogate penis and reduced every item of clothing in my closet to rags fit only for dusting your many awards. Aim that thing elsewhere, Ellison, or I will feed it to you by way of an aperture that will avoid entirely your digestive tract." So I had no trouble identifying with Whitley's behavior in this part of the movie.

Nonetheless, Anne makes it clear to Whitley that he had best hie himself at once to a cranium cleaner who can give him a better handle on these "bizarre visions."

Whitley is shunted from his personal doctor to a psychiatrist (Frances Sternhagen, in a role so brief that one wonders why an actress of her great gifts bothered to get involved in such a project), to whom he imparts all his worst fears. Basically, what Whitley tells her is that these alien visitors have had their way with him, kidnapping him, taking him to their ship, and subjecting him to a medical examination that included sticking long, nasty needles into his brain, and giving him an anal probing with a device as thick around as a rhinoceros horn, a rectal rimjob that is to a sigmoidoscopy as the architecture

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of a Taco Bell is to one of Gaudi's towers.

And like the real-life bestselling Whitley, the cinematic Whitley keeps acting bewildered as to the *reality* of what's going on. He has managed to perfect the fine art of both having and eating his cake. He keeps saying, "Maybe I'm psychotic, maybe it's all a dream, maybe I'm going crazy," (to which most of us would answer, "That'd be my guess") but everyone keeps acting as if what he's gibbering about *might* be true — how can one sensibly cast doubt on a horror novelist's assertions that he's been *tuchis*-terrorized by pint-sized blue alien proctologists dressed for a roadshow revival of *St. Francis of Assisi* — and the shrink decides to put Whitley under hypnosis in order to break through his amnesia. (But I don't recall that anyone ever did an actual real-world anal examination to discover if Whitley's ass looked like ten miles of corduroy road, which would certainly have been the case if someone had shoved a length of stovepipe up there. But, perhaps I digress.)

Under the utterly scientific methods of this latter-day Franz Anton Mesmer, Whitley relives the ghastly encounter with the two (or possibly three) types of e.t.s., and remembers every icky moment of this unscheduled medical exam. The shrink sends him off to an encounter group for further "stabilizing" and he discovers that everyone in the cute little circle has had a similar encounter with marauding aliens. One gets the impression that these far voyagers are more common than the homeless, who also inconvenience us in our daily lives.

Those familiar with the common coin of UFOlogy will no doubt recall a 1975 made-for-tv epic titled *The UFO Incident* starring James Earl Jones and Estelle Parsons and Barnard Hughes, based on the "real-life experiences" of a New England couple named Barney and Betty Somethingorother, who went through exactly the same extragalactically-inspired *mishigoss* as Whitley reports, up to and including the amnesia, the unsettled behavior, the recourse to a shrink, the hypnosis, the total recall of alien invasions of privacy. This is either proof unarguable that we are little more than a burb for vacationing alien physicians who, presumably, don't spend their Wednesday afternoons golfing on Venus, or that Bill Shakespeare was correct when he told me last week that there are really only seventeen basic plots.

Moving right along. Whitley flees the encounter group with the certain conviction that these people are all bonkers, and that he didn't really get cornholed by Ben Caseys

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From Space, and that there must be some *other* explanation. "Then," as the studio synopsis tells us, "he discovers that Andrew has been having similar experiences, and he reaches a level of desperation that is literally beyond fear." Literally beyond fear is, I believe, about thirty miles this side of Cincinnati. And cleanliness is right next door to godliness, and godliness is next door to Woolworth's. But perhaps I digress.

So, for reasons not made terribly clear, Whitley decides to rush back into the Amityville house, er, that is, he goes back to that "secluded corner of upstate New York," to face himself . . . or the visitors. (Quoting again from the studio handout, for the existence of which I am eternally grateful, what with all the vagueness, ambiguity, and those goddam devices still running around loose.)

Up at the cabin Whitley has yet another encounter with the aliens and in their inscrutable fashion they prove to him — and by extension to us — that they are real, that Whitley isn't just another guy two pickles and a sandwich shy of a picnic. "Reaching deep levels of inner strength" the studio synopsis tells us "he comes to an acceptance of them as an enigma and an unknown presence of great power in the world."

He goes home, now understanding that his cosmic mission is to write this bestselling book about his adventures, and late at night he sits down at the PC to begin work, having apparently broken through his block, but before he can write FADE IN, er, Chapter One, he sees a glow outside his apartment window. And as would be the first inclination by any one of us, he knows this is the visitors come again; and he and the wife and kid rush up onto the roof overlooking Manhattan, and (maybe, possibly) we see one of those masklike triangular faces in the stars. Or maybe we don't. At the screening I attended, a few people saw it, most didn't. Either way, there ain't no actual extraterrestrials up there on the roof. A lot of ductwork, some pigeon coops, a few pieces of lawn furniture, but no omnipotent e.t.s. Another big disappointment. Drat!

So Whitley rushes back down to the apartment and begins to write his bestseller. As he writes, the triangular mask of an alien countenance drifts toward him. Christopher Walken looks up and, in the voice of a writer fresh from years of having been blocked, asks the visitor, "What do I call a book about you?" or words to that effect. I can't recall exactly. Kind of vague.

Fade out.

Now, as evenhandedly as I can

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put it, here is the subtext. Larry King has Whitley Strieber on his talk show more than once, and he speaks to him about the events I've just related as if he were talking to William Bennett about the war on drugs or to Christopher Walken about his latest movie role. Not once does anyone suggest that the bestselling, loving, vulnerable Mr. Strieber has winsomely stumbled on a sure-fire way to sell paralogia while showing us that his hands are clean. It could all be delusion, he keeps saying, while rendering the delusions concrete by means of motion picture.

Since we believe what we see on the screen, particularly when we're told it's "based on real events," Streiber has it both ways, and he is able to maintain a facade of calm reason in the face of a tall tale no one in his right mind would buy without hard evidence.

The film came and went in moments. Blessedly. But I've run into people who believe every frame of it, believe Strieber's books convey truth impeccably, and who — incidentally — also swear their ex-spouse is having an affair with the Easter Bunny, that Elvis is working in an AM/PM Mini-Mart in Pascagoula, that Madonna can act, and that the U.S. Air Force has been keeping a crashed flying saucer under wraps since 1947. (Mr. Strieber's latest book, by the way, also deals with this dread secret.)

As regards showing us the ludicrous aliens in this film, I am put in mind of two quotations that should always remain uppermost in the minds of those making scary movies. The first, from Mallarmé: "To define is to kill. To suggest is to create." The second, from the late architect Robert Smithson: "Establish enigmas. Not explanations."

Unfortunately, these urgings do not apply to logical plotting or productive attempts to rid the human race of obscurantism and uneducated conclusions about the physical universe.

But perhaps I digress.

Only this as final, personal note: as one who recently underwent surgery for a horrendous case of strangulated, thrombosed hemorrhoids — an occupational hazard of writers as common as threatening your wife with a shotgun — I can only tell you that the possibly homoerotic scenes of Mr. Strieber's thespic stand-in, Mr. Walken, getting his backside reamed by something the circumfrence of a Roto-Rooter hose and the salutary appearance of a jackhammer made me, how shall I put it, uncomfortable. As who among us, left to our own devices, would not.

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As you may have gathered from the title and the author, the story that follows is not an entirely serious one. As you may not have gathered, it concerns a severed hand and a curse . . .

The Curse of Psamlahkithotep

By Esther M. Friesner

"ASTOUNDING," SAID LORD Galloway, regarding the object on the table before him. The mantelpiece portrait of King Edward VII seemed to share its owner's wonderment at this unique dinnertime offering.

There, on a ground of best white Irish linen, reposed a spicewood box of intricate and exotic carvery. It was painted with variegated bands of color whose brightness the ages had done little to dim, but this was not the greatest marvel. That was revealed when young Ffellowes reached over from his place at His Lordship's right hand and removed the small casket's carefully fitted lid.

"I hope you find it — interesting, m'lud," he said. He did not either look or sound sanguine about it.

His Lordship peered into the opened box for far too long to suit young Ffellowes's mental ease. *"Interesting!"* The word was uttered in a tone calculated and honed to induce trembling in young pups like Ffellowes. The tactic worked.

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Lord Galloway scowled, a disapproving look scarcely less formidable than that of the late queen, whose crepe-hung likeness shared the mantel with her boy Eddie. "*Interesting,* forsooth? Faugh!" The tempest broke over the fruit and cheese. "You, sir, are a confused imposter! Presuming upon my good nature and my affection for your father, wangling yourself this weekend invitation to my country home, eating my food, drinking my port, and all by the ploy of claiming you wished to present me with a trifling souvenir of your gallivantings? I was expecting Egyptian cigarettes, sir, not a ruddy corpse!"

Young Ffellowes's guileless face turned a becoming shade of crimson.

"It's not the whole corpse, m'lud; just the hand." In afterthought he added, "The left one."

Lord Galloway blew a thunderous blast of scorn through his lush auburn mustache. His fist struck the table, making the goblets dance. "I don't care if it's Saint Peter's pall! Egad, boy, there are ladies present!"

In truth, there was one: at her place at the far end of the board, where she had reigned as hostess since an unfortunate family infirmity had confined her mama to a cozy attic boudoir. Lord Galloway's daughter Lydia writhed. She could not have been in greater agony had the box contained the collected billets-doux young Ffellowes had forwarded her from nearly every semicivilized place he had frequented during his tour of Egypt and the Holy Land.

Weakly, she attempted to smooth matters over. "Really, Papa, anyone might bring you Egyptian cigarettes. If Mr. Ffellowes has chose a gift of such rarity for you, there must be a good reason for it."

"Stuff and nonsense. The young need no reasons, only ready cash from their gullible elders." Lord Galloway's eyes narrowed until they resembled a pair of undersized sultanas pressed deep into the suet pudding of his face. "*Is* there perhaps some rational cause for you to come playing the resurrectionist at my dinner table, sir? For the past obligation I bear your father, I charge you to answer me honestly."

The schooltide bond existing between Lord Galloway and the elder Ffellowes was a tie that had frequently caused young Ffellowes discomfits beyond the more physical forms of bondage. In years past, meetings between the two old chums at the Ffellowes' townhouse were invariably punctuated by Sir Ebenezer (Binky) Ffellowes parading his second-best

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heir for inspection, and by Lord Stephen (Stinky) Galloway pinching the lad's cheek brutally and enjoining him to be a man. It had taken tremendous effort of will for young Ffellowes to sit so near to His Lordship's pinching hand at dinner tonight, and only sustaining thoughts of the divine Lydia kept him from making a dash for it.

Now he wound his napkin into a hawser and cleared his throat a good deal more than necessary before replying, "It was Father's idea I pick that up for you, actually, m'lud."

Lord Galloway reared back in his chair and slapped both meaty thighs simultaneously. "Ha! Thought so! Leave it to old Binky to come up with a joke this rare. He always said I fancied myself quite a hand with the ladies. Capital fun, this." He took the relic from its resting place and flourished it like a capon drumstick. Lydia gave a small meep of dismay, which her father ignored. "Remarkable wit, Binky." His roisterous laughter slowly crumpled in on itself like a burning tissue when he realized he was the only one so amused.

"*Hand*," he repeated, glowering at young Ffellowes. "A *hand* with the ladies. Trust you not to see the fun. Nothing half so original'd ever piddle its way into your brainpan, boy."

Young Ffellowes cleared his throat one more time, although his previous bout with imaginary phlegm had left his larynx quite raw. "Actually, m'lud, Father didn't mean it as a joke."

"No? As what, then?"

"Then . . . as a curse, m'lud. Actually."

"Now see here —" Lord Galloway jabbed the wizened extremity at his dinner guest. The Nilotic relic was a most unappetizing shade of gray, with a few dun highlights at the knuckles. The nails were an indeterminate mishmash of colors — ash, ebony, and cyanotic blue — and badly splintered. The middle finger was altogether nailess, and seemed more accusatory for it. There were no rings.

"Oh, nothing personal meant by it, m'lud! No blasphemy intended!" Young Ffellowes held his hands before his face, warding off both the touch and sight of his recent host gift. "Perhaps you recall that letter of yours to the *Times* just before I set off on my Eastern tour? The one decrying all that — that great to-do at the British Museum about the cursed mummy case of a Theban princess?"

Lord Galloway folded all three of his hands on the table before him.

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"To be sure." He sat straighter in his seat, recalling his past journalistic triumph as whipper-in for *le mot juste*. "Deuced big bang-up they were having about the curse of this wog king's tomb and that darky princess's spiritual tantrums. Doom from the tombs of royalty, as that pantywaist lot of dust-grubbers would have it. All very well, but when they'd feed that pap to the British public—"

He gave a scornful laugh, and few men had mastered the scornful laugh half so well as Lord Galloway. Coming from his lips, a lone *haw!* was a juggernaut of sarcasm before which none might stand.

"*Royalty*. Tuppenny princelings — black as the ace of spades, every one of 'em — and damned lucky to be let set foot on British soil even if they are dead. Curse us, would they? Ungrateful heathen swine. Ought not to be allowed. I told them museum fellas I said I'd soon have their mummies toe the line. A firm hand, that's all that's required when you're dealing with your colored; a firm—"

Young Ffellowes exploded with laughter.

"*What's so damned funny?*"

"Wh — what you said, m'lud . . . a firm ha — ha — *hand!*"

Lord Galloway gave his guest a look implying that perhaps Lady Galloway would soon have company in the attic.

"At any rate," His Lordship growled, "they never took me up on my offer. Said I'd go so far as to pass the night in their fool museum — so long as proper bed and board were provided — but they ignored me. Cowards and ingrates, the lot of 'em."

"Yes, m'lud," said a significantly chastened young Ffellowes. "Which was why Father told me to fetch you that." He pointed at the hand. It pointed back. "That hand is a genuine, guaranteed, documented accursed hand. It once belonged to a royal high priest named Psamlahkithotep."

Lord Galloway screwed up his features, which did not benefit from the grimace. "Why'd a sane man want to own such trash? Bloody foreigners."

"I think, m'lud, it was rather attached to him at the time," young Ffellowes provided. "He was half brother to the last pharaoh, Psamtik III, who was defeated by the Persian king Cambyses at Pelusium in 525 B.C., and Cambyses—"

Lord Galloway used the hand to rap out a dead march on the edge of his fruit plate. "And the curse? Apart from having to hear out your inane recitation."

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"Well, m'lud, that's it. I mean, there is a scroll to accompany the hand—" He fumbled at his inner breast pocket and pulled out a slim, crinkly, yellowed roll, which he passed to his host. "As you can see, it's classical Greek, the author supposed to be Herodotus himself, saying as how the hand of Psamlahkithotep's cursed as you please. Cambyses did die stark raving mad, to be sure, but—"

"Probably had a noddy like you upset his postprandial digestion once too often," His Lordship mumbled. He unrolled the scroll and studied it. "Can't make heads or tails of this gibber. You read it to me, boy!"

He flung the scroll back at a puzzled young Ffellowes. "But m'lud, Father told me that the two of you studied classical Greek together at Eton."

"That's as may be," His Lordship replied in a decidedly dangerous tone. "I've forgotten more classical Greek than you'll ever know, and I'll have none of your cheek. Read!"

For once, young Ffellowes did not bother to find his voice, but plunged right into the text. "It was just after I had that unfortunate run-in with the priestess of Bast and her trained leopard that I was conducted to the temple of the obscure goddess Asis, reputed to be some sort of cousin-german to Isis and that ruck. Egyptian deities breed worse than Egyptian bedbugs and are almost as difficult to be rid of. Asis's cult fell from favor long ago, they tell me, due to her limited scope of power. As goddess of unrelenting honesty, her sole extant myth recounts how she met death by telling the evil god Set exactly what she thought of him for killing Osiris. *For this service, Set tore her into ten thousand pieces.*

"'Now I have heard that Egyptian honesty pertains to the divinity Ma'at, and that the soul who wishes entrance to Osiris's kingdom of the dead must have its heart weighed in a balance against the feather of Ma'at. If this is so, the soul escaped cheaply, for the everyday, commonplace honesty of Ma'at is but a milky shadow of Asis's own unstinting exercise of that ruthless virtue. To the realm of Asis belong not the merely truthful, but those who are unable to keep silent about the least aspect of the truth as they see it. They recount it all — unvarnished, entire, and unsolicited — *for the hearer's own good.* In my heart I cannot blame Set.

"'The story next tells how the ten thousand ragtags of the goddess scattered across the face of Egypt. Each was swallowed by a pregnant

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woman, all of whom promptly confessed the true names of their unborn infants' respective fathers. Those who survived gave birth to the first priesthood of Asis, and from these thirty-seven men were all future generations of her priest descended. There was not a man among them who would keep the cruelest truth from his fellow beings, no matter the consequences. They are all dead now; small wonder.

"'The last of that line, descended from Asis's priests on his mother's side, was the half brother of Egypt's ultimate pharoah. This man, Psamlahkithotep, gave the conquering Persian king Cambyses too frank a character analysis. Cambyses personally chopped off the priest's left hand, telling him to be grateful it was not his right. To this, the priest replied: *Vicious and brutal lord, that is all you know of matters. I am — or was — left-handed. Therefore, as you have caused me to lose what is most precious to me — for how can I write the praises of Asis now! (Scribes are not to be trusted; they edit your every word.) — I lay a curse upon the one who severed my hand, and upon all those who follow in the hand's possession. May they, too, lose what is most precious to them; yet, as most men are blind to Asis's fiery light, they shall not recognize what they hold most dear until it is well and truly lost.*

"'Hereat Cambyses cut off Psamlahkithotep's other hand, followed in quick succession by both of his feet, his ears, his nose, his lips, the usual, and lastly his head. He was buried in the Valley of the Kings or thrown in the Nile, or miraculously pulled his severed portions back together and went to Nubia for some reason — depending on which of the local guides you patronize. All versions agree that the left hand remained absent and detached, Cambyses having taken it along with him in mummified state to serve as a portable object lesson on the advantages of diplomacy. Memphis claims to possess his nose, but as that anatomical portion is not cursed, I am uninterested in pursuing the matter.

"'Cambyses lost his mind soon after. Being a Persian, I doubt he valued it too much. Thus, the curse might be said to have worked. Cambyses's eventual successor, Darius, sent the hand back to Egypt by express courier, where I viewed it with these eyes in the derelict temple just outside of Thebes. I don't think it looks accursed. Persians are all half-mad to start with, anyway. I believe I'll steal it.'"

Young Ffellowes lowered the manuscript and regarded his host with the eager yet fearful eye of a prized, pedigreed, cosseted spaniel

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who has just fouled the Bokhara.

"Twaddle," said Lord Galloway.

"Oh yes, m'lud, just so. Twaddle, as you say." Young Ffellowes did not lick His Lordship's hand, but only because the imposing table made it inconvenient. "Yes, if I may say so, a golden opportunity for you to prove once and for all your point. About these Egyptian curses, don't y'know."

Lord Galloway eyed the hand askance. "Humbug," he stated. He did not seem enraptured by the possibilities for self-justification as young Ffellowes obviously saw them.

"Humbug, indeed." The younger man's head bobbed like an understuffed golliwog's. "Of the most blatant sort. Exactly what my father predicted you would say, m'lud, upon receipt of this, my very humble gift to you. After all, we are all educated Englishmen here. We recognize odd-lot heathen curses for the jumble-sale rubbish they are. Still, we do have our duty to set an example for the lower classes."

His Lordship's brows crept together in the fashion of two bull caterpillars squaring off for a mating bout. "Precisely what are you proposing, sir?"

For one so lately afflicted with a hesitant tongue, young Ffellowes now became transformed into a veritable Demosthenes, sans pebbles. "Oh, m'lud, if I may elaborate—? Yes, quite. You see, it will be the work of a moment for news of your latest possession to reach some Grub Street hack or other. That is, with a little . . . judicious indiscretion on my part?"

"The press?" Lord Galloway frowned. "Harpies all, fouling honest men's lives with their inky dribblings. What need have I of them?"

"M'lud, how else will anyone know of your courage? The noble triumph of rationality over superstition?" Young Ffellowes wiggled his fingers at the hand, inadvertantly brushing it. He anxiously used his napkin to scrub away all trace of that contact, while continuing to babble: "You don't want to sleep with that thing for nothing, you know."

"I don't want to sleep with it at all."

"You must! That is—" Young Ffellowes quailed before his host's black look. "That is, for the sake of the story they'll write up for all the papers. Such news it shall be, m'lud!" He framed imaginary headlines with his hands. "*Peer Defies Doom of Ancients. Courageous Briton Proves Legendary Curse So Much Bushwa. Lord Galloway Kindles Light of Reason, Illumines Darkest Egypt.*" He lowered his hands and voice simultaneously to murmur, "If word of your actions were to reach Westminster, who is

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to say that the Birthday Honors list might not lie beyond the realm of possibility?"

"By heaven!" Lord Galloway surged to his feet, slamming the unfortunate hand down amid the cutlery. He clapped young Ffellowes a mighty buffet on the shoulder. "Ripping notion, ain't it, then? Put those museum fellas in their place once and for all, show up this natter about the maledictions of ancient civilizations keeping honest Englishmen up nights, set things to rights. . . . And all I've got to do is —?"

"Hold your hand, m'lud," young Ffellowes said. "Or simply lay it on the bedside table. That's all. I shall handle the less — ah — refined end of the operation. Press contacts and all that rot. Father said I ought."

"Excellent, my boy, excellent." Lord Galloway favored his guest with a brace of hearty thumps. "Couldn't do that myself, you know. Beneath the dignity of a peer."

"To be sure."

From her end of the table and the proceedings, the fair Lydia finally took heart and a deep breath. "Oh Papa, you can't mean it!" she exclaimed. "What if that nasty claw is cursed after all?"

"Lydia, are you having female troubles?" her father inquired bluntly. "Cursed, forsooth! Blather."

"But if it's not blather?"

"Yah! The Greek history-writing chap said he pinched the thing, and what did he ever lose, eh?"

Lydia remained game in the face of her father's challenge. "Herodotus was called the Father of History, Papa. If the modern sort of historian is any gauge, I think that what they value most is to have their chronicles taken seriously, yet poor Herodotus was also called the Father of Lies. He took that wicked hand and lost his reputation. Who knows what treasure you might lose, by the same token? I can't bear the thought of it!"

"Now see here, my girl, stop your moaning," His Lordship commanded. "The curse clearly states I'll lose only what I hold most dear without knowing I value it. Until it's lost. Fool twisty way to set curses, but what can you expect from the natives? That leaves my losing you out of the running if that's what's buzzing up your bonnet."

"But Papa —"

"Got your value by heart, I have. So I ought, you being my only child and heir. Why, I'd place your worth on the marriage market as good for

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reeling an earldom into the family at the very least, and don't you forget it!"

So intent was His Lordship on driving home how dearly he held his daughter that he could not see the stunned look of despair that suddenly dragged down young Ffellowes's features. By the time Lord Galloway returned his attention to his guest, that gentleman had regained some outward show of control.

"Well done, sir!" said Lord Galloway to young Ffellowes. "Egad, you may prove worthy of old Binky's blood after all. I almost regret not having assigned you one of the better bedrooms." He stuffed the hand into his breast pocket. "I shall pass the night with this gewgaw upon my very pillow. See if you can't convey *that* to the scriveners without bollixing the message too badly. My telephone is at your disposal. Use the unit in the servants' quarters. And now I believe it is time to retire."

Lord Galloway's whim was law beneath his own roof, including the declaration of curfew at an hour when Londoners would just be taking their second wind. Young Ffellowes and the lovely Lydia made no demur, each bidding the other as circumspect and guarded a good-night as if one had owed the other money. She retreated to her room, he to the telephone, yet later that very night, when darkness lapped the Galloway country seat, there were stirrings in the parlor not attributable to the mice.

Without benefit of any light save the full moon peeping through the draperies, young Ffellowes and his Lydia found each other's arms and stayed there. For a time the only sounds in that vast and high-ceilinged chamber were the squealing complaints of the springs in the horsehair sofa, and breathless gasps for air between extended kisses.

At length, however, Lydia disengaged herself from her swain and softly cried, "Oh Colin, I am so terribly frightened."

"Of the hand, my love?" young Ffellowes purred in her dainty ear. "You have nothing to fear from any hand." Considering his accompanying actions, he might have done well to specify *any hand save mine.*

Dexterously, Lydia distanced herself. "La, no! What sort of goose do you take me for?"

"A swan, rather," young Ffellowes breathed, caught up in the extempore poetry of the romantically thwarted. "A golden falcon, a phoenix, a bird of paradise—"

"A hen." Lydia folded her arms, ignoring her lover's blandishments. "A

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Ffellowes reached for a sword that was not — that had never been — there.

sad little leghorn hen for Papa to plump up and cart off to market, pluck and serve on some horrid old earl's table."

"Ah yes." Remembrance of His Lordship's earlier words washed back over young Ffellowes, leaving his morale badly draggled. "So he said. Well, I'm certainly no earl."

"No, you are not; nor your father before you."

Young Ffellowes sighed mightily. "Poor Father. He favors our match, you know. I think he rather hoped this little curse charade would warm your gov'nor toward my suit. Get on his good side."

"He might have spared himself. Nothing will deter Papa from wedding me off to the family advantage." Lydia spoke as one who knows. "Not if he and your papa had attended a dozen Etons! I'm to bring in earls or better, else nothing."

"I don't suppose your papa would settle for the younger son of a belted knight? After you've aged a bit?"

To this, Lydia responded with only a heavenward roll of her adorable blue eyes. The young couple moped in silence for a time, then young Ffellowes brightened.

"We could elope!"

Ah, nay, young master, that would never do.

"No, it wouldn't," Lydia agreed. "My papa would likely bully your papa into disinheriting you, and then how should we ever live on—? *Oh!*" It suddenly struck the girl that the initial rejection of young Ffellowes's impractical suggestion had not been hers.

Verily, apart from the financial aspects, such a plan must not be. As the lovers stiffened where they sat, the unseen speaker went on. *For then, you see, you would have this maiden in marriage, and my curse would remain unfulfilled. As it has not failed in nigh two thousand years, I see no reason for it to come a cropper now.*

Lydia jammed a fist partway into her mouth. Young Ffellowes reached for a sword that was not — that had never been — there. By the moon's silvery corpselight, a shaven-headed phantom watered its way into visibility between the horsehair sofa and the french windows. It wore a kilt

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of pleated linen, a gold pectoral lavished with turquoise and lapis lazuli, gilded leather sandals, and an avuncular smile that set young Ffellowes's teeth on edge.

Greetings, my children, said the apparition.

"I say!" young Ffellowes remarked sharply. He encircled his Lydia with protective arms. "Be off with you. You are upsetting the lady."

The phantom shrugged. *My apologies. In life, it was never said of Psamlahkithotep that he caused the fair sex anything but joy.* He made a motion with his left arm.

Lydia gave a muffled shriek. "It's putting an evil spell on us!"

Am I? The phantom looked surprised. *I did not mean it so. I but made a sign of noncommittal blessing used by the priests of Asis.* He raised the guilty arm and studied it. *True, the blessing proves vague when done by one with my infirmity. A wrist stump never could convey the proper hieratic nuances.*

"See here, if it's your hand you're after, I haven't got it anymore," young Ffellowes snapped. "You'll find it upstairs in Lord Galloway's room." He attempted to soothe Lydia, who was making noises like a distraught hamster.

I know.

"You do?"

I am dead. It is above all an educational experience.

"Then why are you bothering us?"

There is the curse to be seen to. The priestly ghost spoke as if this obligation were on a par with paying off an importunate greengrocer. *Although you have passed it along, you did hold my hand in your possession long enough to merit all the perquisites thereto pertaining.*

"I never—!" Anyhow, it was my father put me up to purchasing your filthy old paw, and he never so much as offered to repay the expense."

Expense? The phantom registered interest. *How much?* Young Ffellowes named a sum, then waited while Psamlahkithotep made the necessary calculations translating it back to the specie of his day. He did not seem happy. *So little as that!*

"Well, it wasn't ruddy little to me, coming out of my pocket when I didn't even want the stupid thing in the first place." Young Ffellowes was positively sullen about it. "Now I've to suffer the curse, too. Oh, this is topping."

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But you have already suffered it.

"Have I?" Young Ffellowes stared first at the ghost, then at Lydia, as if he half-expected her to assume the same transparent state then and there.

No, no, no. Psamlahkithotep clicked his tongue impatiently. *Are you incapable of reading aloud and listening to your own words at the same time! It was all in the scroll. You will lose what you value most* without knowing you valued it until it is gone! *As you already know, you value this young woman's love; she shall not vanish.*

"Well, I am pleased to hear that," Lydia remarked.

Her lover did not share her relief. "Then what *am* I to forfeit?"

The priestly vision awkwardly wiggled the index finger of his right hand. *That would be telling.*

"You're a trifle long in the tooth to turn this kittenish, aren't you, my good man?" Young Ffellowes tightened his lips. "If I'm not to lose Lydia, I'm quite obliged, certainly, but I do think you might at least have the courtesy to come right out and tell me what I am bound to mislay. Unless you're afraid to be honest."

That taunt fetched the Egyptian. His kohl-rimmed eyes shot baleful sparks of supernal fire, some of which landed on the sofa. While Lydia beat these out with a heavy bolster, Psamlahkithotep snarled, *The priests of Asis never shrank from honesty, though it cost us our lives. You would know your loss! So be it. Never shall you lose the love of that sweet maiden, yet* marriage *to her — Ha! Sooner shall I be made whole again than ever that shall be!*

"Oh, I say." Young Ffellowes lost his spunk and spoke as one wounded to the core. "You can't mean it, old man."

I can so.

"Why, you horrid brute!" Lydia cast the bolster down and stamped her foot, then picked up one of a pair of Dresden vases from the nearby console table and flung it against the far wall in pique. The gentlemen, both of flesh and spirit, regarded her with a tentatively fearful look. Such unwonted ferocity suddenly pouring from so frail a vessel was enough to give even a dead man pause.

My lady, I never —

"Hush, you wicked thing. I am not addressing you." the ghost's relief was palpable, as was young Ffellowes's mounting apprehension as his beloved directed the full complement of her rage his way. "So, it would

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seem you value *marriage* to me more than you value *me* alone. And why would that be, my darling Colin?" the endearment was a rhetorical husk, the cicada shell of a formality. "Perhaps because it is not my unadorned person you covet so much as my papa's endowment?"

"See here, Lydia my love, I covet your unadorned person very much indeed, as I have been attempting to prove to—"

The lady did not hear out his protestations, but slewed her gaze toward the ghost. Her eyes could not shoot sparks, yet still they managed to figuratively crisp the edges of his extoplasm. "Curses," she said, making the word itself seem the thing. "Awful, selfish, cowardly, *vile* things! Just because *you* hadn't the sense God gave a nit, and spoke out of turn to Cambyses and went on the chop for it, you had to strike back from beyond the grave at perfectly innocent people. The idea! You, sir, are a fool and a poltroon. You might just have put paid to Cambyses and been done — he *was* the one who did for you, not my poor Colin."

Yes, but—

"Be *still!*" Another stamp of Lydia's satin slipper quelled the phantom's objections. "Yes, you might've fixed Cambyses and had nothing but praise from me for it, but no. *You* couldn't leave well enough alone. *You* had to show off. *You* had to have one of these doom-down-through-the-centuries affairs."

Young Ffellowes squirmed. "Precious girl, you're going to annoy the gentleman." He cast a worried glance at the constellation of holes that the ghost's fiery gaze had burned into the sofa upholstery.

"Annoy him?" Lydia's scornful laugh was a more melodious version of her father's. With deceptive sweetness, she inquired of the ghost, "*Am* I annoying you?"

To be honest—

"Good! It was dishing up the sauceless truth that got you where you are. Now it's your turn to see how it tastes. That curse of yours wasn't simple revenge; it was sheer self-indulgence — and not half of it because your brother got to be pharoah while you were stuck grubbing about as a mere temple priest, I wouldn't be surprised."

Psamlahkithotep hung his head. *Asis's truth is more blinding than the midday sun. Mad dogs alone venture out beneath it unprepared. Indeed, I regret my temper, and yet — and yet —* He gulped like a surfacing bullfrog, and then millennia of frustration gushed from his soul. *Why should it be*

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pharoah alone who commands the fear of men after death! Had I a copper for every worthless prince's tomb I sealed with endless litanies of sacerdotal warnings, I might have bought half of Thebes. Why shouldn't I get home use of a malediction or two, especially after what I went through! His lower lip protruded. *It's not fair.*

"Fair or not, you know you've done wrong, and I hope you're properly ashamed of yourself."

It is so. The ghost was chastened. *I admit it, and I am sorry.*

"Now the question is, How do you mean to square it?"

I cannot, Psamlahkithotep said sadly. *A curse, once flown, cannot be called back again.*

"I've had dogs like that," young Ffellowes remarked. "A little discipline soon saw 'em through, though. A firm hand—"

"Colin! *Really!*" Lydia hastened to the phantom's side and did her best to embrace him. "You might make better choice of words in this poor man's presence. He did say he was sorry. Why, you've cut him to the quick."

In truth, Lady, it was Cambyses who—

"I'm sure that he never did anyone the least bit of harm before that disgusting Persian person went lopping off other people's hands as if they were ilex branches. And for what? Simply because he wasn't man enough to hear the truth about himself. How perfectly unjust, making another bear the burden of one's own lack of character!"

I said it wasn't fair, Psamlahkithotep put in.

"No fairer than sticking me with your tatty old curse," young Ffellowes grumbled.

Ah, but I am no less a victim than those who have felt my curse's power, young master! Woe, alas, even were I able to lift its doom, yet still I would suffer beneath a malediction of mine own.

"The deuce you say."

It is true. The lore of my people states most clearly that none may pass into the kingdom of Osiris incomplete. Alack, I do not qualify— he waved about his truncated arm to underscore his words —*and so must wander this world as a disembodied spirit unto the final day.* His sigh riffled the draperies. *At least the curse keeps me company.*

"Oh you poor, poor thing!" Lydia's tender heart was touched. She gathered the ghost still nearer, until he was quite comfortably ensconced in

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her bosom. He made some gratuitous sniveling noises and snuggled himself in deeper.

Young Ffellowes viewed these liberties with a gimlet eye. In vain did his common sense argue that the ghost was immaterial, and therefore beyond the jurisdiction of the social proprieties. So far as he was concerned, there was room for but one presence in Lydia's bosom: his.

Irritation brought inspiration. "Well, there's your trouble right there, old man!" he announced briskly. "All this dustup's to be laid at the door of that severed hand of yours, ain't it? Why, if Cambyses had kept a sense of humor, you'd be nicely dead by now, and no one the worse for knowing you. The thing to do, as I see it, is fetch you back the paw, send the curse packing, and boot you on your merry way to Osiris, what?"

The ghost pulled back from Lydia's bosom and rubbed his chin. *By Asis, that might work! It is at least worth the try.* He returned to his previous location.

"Right, then." Young Ffellowes started for the parlor door. "I'll just pop into His Lordship's room and—"

"*You'll do nothing of the sort!*" Lord Galloway's voice rolled like thunder through the parlor. The midnight conspirators trembled at the sound. He strode into the center of the moonlit chamber. "Lydia, go to your room!"

"But Papa, I—"

"*To your room!*"

Meekly, Lydia bowed her head. The ghost evinced real regret as she gently disengaged him from her arms and trailed out of the parlor. Young Ffellowes thought he saw a tinge of higher color creep into Psamlahkithotep's cheeks.

You should not speak so to such a gentle creature. The priestly revenant's words to His Lordship were heavy with menace. *You do not merit such a daughter.*

"If you're thinking to make off with her under the terms of your raggedy curse, my lad, you've another thought coming. I *value* Lydia well enough for you to peddle your mumbo jumbo elsewhere." Splendid in a silk dressing gown, the peer leveled an accusing finger at his phantom caller. It was attached to the mummified hand.

"I say, m'lud," young Ffellowes ventured. "We were just chatting about that bijou you've got there, y'know. I rather think that were we to give it

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back to this gentleman here, patch it on somehow, we could nicely sidestep the whole matter of curses and such, all perfectly legal and aboveboard, so—"

"I'll deal with *you* later. Or rather, I'll have a word about you with Binky." Lord Galloway did not bother to look away from the ghost while addressing the mortal. "As for you, you ruddy hedge-hob, I'll give you five minutes to be off my property, else I'll pitch this dried pippin of yours smack into the furnace belowstairs."

Psamlahkithotep gasped in dismay. *Lord, do not! Once so thoroughly destroyed, I may never reclaim it, and thus be doomed forever to expulsion from Osiris's fair realm!*

"Five minutes," Lord Galloway reiterated. He produced a heavy pocket-watch from his robe and flipped the watch open.

But the curse—! Only restore to me what is mine, and I swear I shall lift all trace of the curse from you and any even remotely connected with your house!

The priest's pleas were in vain. "Once you are out of my house, you might do well to inquire of your goblin friends whether a Galloway has ever been known to part willingly with anything in his possession, especially when waylaid by a dusky beggar like yourself. Three minutes."

Fool, you trifle with powers you do not understand! Psamlahkithotep's eyes were getting that incendiary quality again. Sparks danced in the shadowy room.

"I understand that you've got the manners of a Billingsgate porter and the brains of an earwig. And if you set one stick of my furnishings aflame, I shall return the favor on *this*." He poked the hand at its rightful owner. "*One* minute. No, wait; now I think of it, this watch was always a bit slow. You're behind your times, boy, and I am a man of my word." So saying, His Lordship snapped the watch shut and marched for the furnace.

"But, m'lud—!" Young Ffellowes tried to intervene on the priest's behalf, clutching His Lordship's arm.

"*Haw!*" boomed Lord Galloway, shaking him off like a working-class creditor.

Young Ffellowes threw the bolster at him.

It was a mad, gallant, heroic, totally futile gesture, with unexpected results. Struck fairly abaft the beam, Lord Galloway whirled about, face distorted with fury, ready to flay the impertinent youth alive. So bent

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was he on seeing to it that young Ffellowes would never live to be called old Ffellowes that he trod upon the dangling cord fastening his dressing gown. Yanked off-balance, he attempted to regain equilibrium through several fast maneuvers with his feet. Never one of Terpsichore's favored children, he caught his slipper in the hem of his robe. This in turn made him stumble, which inevitably led to a fall, which inadvertently caused him to strike his head a smart blow on the leg of the horsehair sofa and lie still.

Peace reigned in the Galloway parlor.

"Is he dead?" young Ffellowes whispered.

Psamlahkithotep knelt beside the body, but the only wrist he picked up was his own. *No fear of that, my friend.* He rose and proffered the hand to young Ffellowes. *I should have thought of this long ago. Shall we?*

It was a bad job of schoolboy mending, but, with Lydia returned to offer advice and encouragement, young Ffellowes finally managed to darn the priest's desiccated hand back onto his discarnate body. Throughout the operation he did his best to keep a tight rein on the sense of pure physical revulsion he felt at having to touch the mummified object.

Ah! Psamlahkithotep held up the finished job and flexed his livid fingers. The hand wavered and underwent a strange metamorphosis from flesh to spirit. It looked all the better for it. *That's done it.* He made another gesture at the young people; this time its meaning was clearly benevolent. *Now I may retire to the eternal reward awaiting me.* He began to fade.

"Just a tick, there, if you please!" Young Ffellowes made a staying grab for the priest's transformed hand, no longer fearing its touch. He was a trifle taken aback to feel how cool and yielding was the ghostly flesh, almost like putting one's fingers into a blancmange.

Psamlahkithotep arched one brow. *Yes?*

"Well — ah — the curse, don't y'know. It's not still on, is it?"

On you, no. The priest turned his eyes to where Lord Galloway still paralleled the parlor carpet. *On him, yes, and on all those of his bloodline.*

"But that's me!" cried Lydia. "It's not fair!"

Perhaps not, returned the dissolving phantom. *But console yourself to know that I am quite, quite ashamed of myself.* His wicked grin lingered awhile after he was gone.

"Abominable beast." Lydia flounced down on the sofa. Young Ffellowes

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sat beside her and attempted to hearten her out of her pet. In the matter of such consolations, one thing led to another, and by the time Lord Galloway recovered consciousness, his daughter had lost that which no ordinary maiden may ever hope to recover. As Lydia was rather keen on Colin Ffellowes, it must be said that she could not have valued what she lost too highly until it was gone.

Naturally young Ffellowes wanted to do the right thing by Lydia. Thus the first words Lord Galloway heard on awakening were: "M'lud, I should esteem it an honor if you would bestow upon me your daughter's hand in marriage."

It might have been the talk of hands that precipitated such a violent reaction. Lord Galloway seized his guest by seat and collar and personally lofted him out the front door. Young Ffellowes's personal effects followed from an upstairs window. Obviously His Lordship was not ready to practice Christian forgiveness in the matter of the bolster, nor the fact that his Egyptian relic had vanished.

Miserable, young Ffellowes caught the next train to London and sequestered himself in his rooms, there awaiting the summons that must come from his father, and the subsequent dressing-down he should receive for his impolitic actions at the Galloway country seat.

This did not occur. Instead, within a fortnight, young Ffellowes was in receipt of a peculiar telegram from Lydia, inviting him to meet her at the Gaiety music hall in Soho.

"What is all this about, Lydia?" he asked the moment he entered the best reserved box seat in the house.

"Our future, Colin." She was smug as a feline heir to a creamery. Silently, she indicated that he watch the stage.

Young Ffellowes was bemused. What could there be of any interest to him in a cheesebox theater like this? The evening's bill was a variety revue of nominal entertainment. A blowsy soubrette finished her song. An incompetent juggler was hissed back into the wings. A spotty Ganymede stepped up to change the program card once more, and there, plain for the world to see, was the notice: "GIGGLES" GALLOWAY. HAPPY TUNES, SNAPPY PATTER. The orchestra struck up a merry air, and out onto the boards waltzed Lydia's papa.

He was dressed as the late queen, except for a pair of scarlet bloomers, and his original composition "Whoops, There You Are, Alfie!" soon had

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the entire hall singing along between laughter.

"Good Lord, Lydia, that can't be your father!"

"But it is.' Lydia's lips curved into a delicious smile.

"But to sing — to strut so on a public stage — to wear such an absurd rig-out —!" Young Ffellowes was all a-sputter. "By Jove, has the man no dignity?"

"Not anymore," Lydia murmured. "He lost it about a week ago, by my calculation. So sad. I do think it's what he put most stock in, without ever realizing." She bent her luminous gaze upon her lover. "Since I am of age, I honestly don't think we shall have any trouble convincing the legal authorities that Papa should transfer control of our holdings to me, do you?"

"None, my angel." Young Ffellowes stared off into the footlights, enraptured by a future suddenly beautiful as Osiris's storied kingdom. "None at all."

"And Mama will be so glad of the company."

The music stopped; His Lordship took a bow. It was entirely proper and downright sporting that the swell young couple in the best box seat led the audience in giving old Stinky a great big hand.

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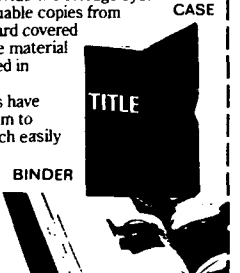

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Gene O'Neill ("The Armless Conductor," September 1987) offers a new story about a marine in Vietnam who is obsessed with good luck charms and who finally acquires the ultimate in talismans.

Awaken Dragon

By Gene O'Neill

WEAK RAYS OF light from the pale sun reach out across the rocky steppe, eventually touching a dark cave mouth high on an escarpment. At the foot of the cliff in the icy shadows cast by a pair of huge boulders, the air shimmers and begins to glow. . . . As the glow fades, figures gradually materialize: six small men dressed in flimsy black pajamalike garb and thongs, their rifles slung and shouldered. Gasping plumes of steam in the air, the men shiver and clutch themselves tightly, huddling together for warmth, the expressions on their faces a mix of fear and confusion. They look about in silence, weapons forgotten. A sound of heavy wingbeats draws their gazes up the cliff face to a ledge—

All six scramble to unsling their rifles, but it is too late. The last thing they see is a holocaust of blinding light. . . .

Bouncing around on the hard bench, Ken Montin glimpsed the lights of Da Nang flash by from the back of the six-by, the night trapping heat,

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dissonant sound, and an overwhelming smell of diesel fumes, as the truck wound through evening traffic into the downtown area, finally braking in front of the Coney Island Bar. "Ya'll got *two* hours," the driver advised the Marines in the back of the six-by. "Any joker not back here by eight, misses his Hong Kong flight. . . . Understand?"

"O.K., Sarge," someone yelled back as five Marines scrambled over the tailgate, dropped to the street, and brushed dust from their pressed trops.

The five were immediately assaulted by a wave of girl-women also dressed in uniform — low-cut blouses, miniskirts, and high heels. The couples headed into the Coney Island or one of the other nearby G.I. bars.

But Montin hung back until the others disappeared from sight, then he eased himself over the tailgate and dropped to the ground. He turned away from the blinking neon lights, and, despite the oppressive mugginess and crowded street, he decided to wander with his duffel bag in hand, try to walk out the sense of unease that bugged him. Jesus, he thought, dodging a gook shouting at him from a bicycle. You're s'posed to *relax* on R and R. But he'd been uptight since leaving base camp, feeling funny . . . *naked* without his flak jacket decorated with his good-luck charms and amulets. That was it, of course. He stopped and bought a pack of gum from a skinny little kid with kinky hair — one of the many half-breeds. Placing the gum in his pocket, he touched the little plastic vial and sighed deeply. Inside the vial was a rolled-up scroll printed: ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པ་དྨེ་ཧཱུྃ • A Navy corpsman had sold it to him as a copy of the Tibetan Buddhist prayer chant: OM MANI PADME HUM. Heavy shit! So he wasn't completely naked. No sir.

After wandering for half an hour, he found himself back at the cluster of G.I. bars. He heard a familiar voice booming from the open door of the Texas Bar. Peeking inside, he saw Technical Sergeant Henry Brown — his senior D.I. back at MCRD — who was joking in his loud west Texas drawl with a ragged shoeshine boy. Montin hadn't seen his old instructor for over two years, but, like most everyone in the Third Marines, he was aware of Brown's growing reputation and the crazy rumors that he possessed some kind of heavy talisman capable of making hostiles disappear into thin air. Obsessed with good-luck charms, those rumors intrigued Montin. He was delighted when Gunny Brown recognized him and invited him in for a drink, hoping to learn the secret of the man's remarkable luck. Sure enough, after a couple of drinks, Brown showed Montin his tattoo: a batlike beast from Chinese mythology over his heart. When

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Brown discovered Montin was headed for Hong Kong, he gave him a note:

Susie Q
White Horse Bar, Wan-chi District
(signed) Henry Brown

Immediately after landing in Hong Kong, Montin caught a cab to the edge of the famed red-light district. The facade of the bar was nondescript, a door with a round blackened window framing a white stallion rising up on its hind legs over Gothic lettering: White Horse Bar. Inside, Montin paused, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. Two American sailors were dancing with a pair of bar girls to music from a jukebox, Janis Joplin growling about "Me and Bobby McGee." The bartender was polishing glasses, and several other bar girls were idling away time in booths to the right. Montin made his way across the dance floor, aware of the seated women staring at him expectantly.

He handed the bartender Brown's note.

The man adjusted his steel-rimmed glasses and held the note close to a light over the well bottles, slowing mouthing each word. Then he looked up with a wide grin, like a student who knows the answer. "Oh yes," he said proudly, pointing to the last booth along the wall, where a woman sat alone smoking a cigarette.

Montin crossed the room. "Susie?" he asked stiffly.

The woman dressed in typical wan-chi garb — a satin brocade dress slit from hip to knee exposing her bare leg — remained silent and eyed Montin. Then she nodded for him to sit; but instead of sliding over as he expected, she indicated he take a seat across the booth, his back to the other women. Strange woman. He found something else unsettling, too — the color of her eyes was silvery gray, almost metallic, a curious shade for an Oriental.

Might be the lighting, he thought, pushing the note across the table. "I want a tattoo like the Gunny's."

After reading the note, she glanced up and said in very heavily accented English. "Ah yes, Sergeant Brown. It been a long time. Hmmm. Tall black man with gold tooth . . . here." She pointed to one of her front teeth.

Puzzled by the description, Montin shook his head. Then he grinned. "Gunny Hank is a short, wiry Texan with a red mustache . . . here."

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Unperturbed by the ease with which he penetrated her transparent test, the woman continued to gaze squarely into his eyes, the silence making Montin squirm in the booth. Finally the woman cleared her throat and asked, "You infantry Marine?"

He nodded.

"Part of a rifle team?" She leaned closer, her tone almost intimate.

Guardedly, he admitted, "Yeah, I'm a grunt."

"Long time in Vietnam?"

Again he nodded.

"Many patrols?"

He remained silent a moment, beginning to get angry. "Hey, what is this?"

She ignored his question and leaned closer, a kind of belligerent challenge in her tone. "You shoot any pajama men?"

He smiled. "Yeah, we've hit a few."

For the first time, the woman seemed to relax, and smiled, the expression washing over her face, making her eyes glitter as if they were a pair of coins. The color was *no* trick of the light. Casually, she touched his hand. "What you name?"

He told her.

She withdrew her hand from his. "O.K., Ken-neth Mon-teen. You call me Susie Q, like song."

The name didn't fit, but he agreed.

"We go see a friend, Mr. Wang," Susie Q announced, rising from the booth.

Montin was taken aback by her height — almost six feet — and the way she moved — effortlessly, like a dancer.

The woman made a gesture to the bartender that she was leaving, not a surbservient move of employee to boss, but more casual, indicating the opposite relationship. Montin followed her outside through a thinned crowd, the woman leading him from the wan-chi through an area of open stalls and food stands, some still open despite the lateness of the hour, the food smells reminding Montin he hadn't eaten since breakfast. But his appetite quickly disappeared as they made their way between two stands: the one on the left offering dried fowl — chickens and geese cut from leather; the other stall contained tanks of live snakes, lizards, and amphibians. Beyond the stands he followed the woman down an alley of small

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shops, mostly closed for the evening. Suddenly they stopped at a grimy window that appeared like magic in a solid wall. "This right place," Susie Q said, tapping the window.

Two lines of Chinese characters framed a pale yellow orb, all dimly illuminated from the interior of the shop. Montin nodded numbly, pressing closer to the window, trying to peer inside, but unable to see anything because of the dirt. He traced his fingers over the row of ideograms and asked, "What do they say?"

Struggling with the translation, Susie Q spoke slowly, "House of Pale Sun . . . herbs, potions, illustrated charms."

What's a pale sun? Montin thought; but before he could phrase a question, the woman was leading him inside.

The door swung back and made a faint tinkling sound as they entered the shop. A single bulb shrouded by a dark shade dangled down from the ceiling on a frayed cord, providing a golden pyramid of light, illuminating the tiny, bare countertop, and reminding Montin of Bateman's Billiards back home — a light over a pool table. But it was the only familiar aspect of the place. Behind the counter was a wall of drawers: from floor to ceiling, row after row of identical ebony-lacquered, unmarked drawers, each about the size of the end of a shoe box. In the corner was a library-style ladder, obviously used to service the upper rows of black boxes. Montin's gaze slid to the left of the ladder, to a veiled curtain of beaded strings that broke the plane of a plywood partition. He turned about slowly. Nothing else, except the lingering, heavy, pungent aroma of incense. He certainly wasn't in any pool hall.

The front door opened, and a young Chinese girl entered, clutching a piece of paper and two Hong Kong bills in her hands. Then, through the beaded curtains at the rear of the shop shuffled an old man. He was tiny, his scraggly mustache and goatee matching the color of his quilted pants and coat, moving quietly on black slippers: an Oriental elf. He took up a position behind the counter, bowed toward Montin and Susie Q, and spoke a greeting in Chinese.

The woman bowed back, her posture one of deference, and spoke slowly and politely to the old man. Then, half-turning, she explained to Montin: "Mr. Wang, he speak no English. But he understand why you here."

Mr. Wang nodded as if understanding the explanation, and looked straight into Montin's eyes. The old man's gaze gleamed youthfully in

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the dim light. Abruptly, he broke eye contact and beckoned toward the child in a voice that contrasted with the strength of his gaze, but matched his dried, fragile appearance.

The young girl stepped to the counter, offering the money and the crumpled list.

Mr. Wang smoothed out the paper on the countertop and studied the characters carefully, nodding repeatedly. Finished reading, he bent over and produced a large square of butcher paper and a brass finger scale from beneath the counter, setting both items next to the list and money. Initial preparations completed, he smiled an apology for making Susie Q and Montin wait, then he turned and eyed the bank of featureless drawers. He moved the ladder to the center of the wall, and, with amazing spryness, he ascended the rungs effortlessly, like a puff of gray smoke rising on a still day. He withdrew two dried brown leaves from a drawer on the top row, then descended and placed the leaves on the square of butcher paper.

After half-bowing to his audience, he shifted the ladder and mounted two steps, leaned out, and opened a drawer in the center of the bank, taking out a plastic packet of ashlike dust. He climbed back down and placed the packet next to the leaves. For a few seconds, the old man paused, grooming his skimpy goatee and contemplating the drawers near the floor next to the shop window. "Ahhh . . . ," he murmured, moving to his right, squatting and taking from the drawers something that resembled a dried bug. He placed the rust-colored beetle next to the dust and leaves. Balancing the scale on the fulcrum of a bony forefinger, he carefully weighed each item, announcing the result in Chinese. After folding up the butcher paper, he bent down and produced ink and a marking pen, and itemized the purchase on the outside of the package, using the artistic stroke of a calligrapher. Finally the old man made change for the two bills from beneath the counter again, and gave the child the parcel and coins.

Susie Q leaned close to Montin and whispered, "Mr. Wang very good doctor."

Montin nodded, scanning the bank of drawers. There must be over a hundred, and none of them marked in any way. No price list and a finger scale. He shook his head. The old boy was neither elf nor doctor. He was a wizard.

Then Susie Q spoke to Mr. Wang at some length.

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At first the old man listened quietly as if he were hearing a familiar story; but gradually his eyes lit up, and he interrupted several times. Susie Q answered politely. Finally he nodded and smiled at Montin as the woman finished speaking. She turned to Montin and explained briefly, "I say to him you know Sergeant Brown . . and you brave warrior, too."

At that point the old man came from behind the counter, gesturing toward the doorway of beaded strings.

"It time to see charms," the woman said, taking Montin's arm and guiding him into the adjoining room.

Mr. Wang flicked on a light, then moved to the far corner to a pair of stools separated by a small table that contained racked vials of ink and tattooing instruments. But it was the walls that captured Montin's attention. Drawings, marvelous psychedelic drawings, covered the walls. A golden serpent coiled, fangs dripping an amber poison . . . a fierce catlike beast with black-and-white markings . . . a flying frog . . . and a host of other creatures, probably beings from ancient Chinese myth. Gunny Hank had been right, Montin thought: this place is really incredible. The colors alone are amazing, faintly luminescent, almost aglow in the dim light, which imparts a kind of power, almost supernatural.

"These very old," Susie Q explained, "from long ago." She stepped to the nearest sample, a huge green dragonfly, its wings glimmering iridescently. She pointed at it, questioning Mr. Wang, who remained seated unobtrusively in the corner.

In a matter-of-fact tone, the old man explained the charm's significance. And in a slightly disjointed voice, Susie Q struggled with the translation: "The dragonfly, he mean long life. He live near water, but even during time when ponds turn to dust and no rain, still he live. . . . He bring back water; he give long time good luck . . . long life to wearer."

Yes, but that wasn't what Montin had in mind when he'd seen Gunny Hank's tattoo. He let his gaze roam around the room to the wall space directly above Mr. Wang, where several items hung: a bow and quiver of arrows and set of armor — the Asian style of gear, varnished strips of leather fashioned into skirt, vest, and helmet. Montin pointed at the array of battle objects and asked, "What's all this?"

Susie Q smiled and explained, "Mr. Wang great warrior, too."

Montin looked at the longbow, then at the frail old man. Hell, I couldn't even draw that thing, he thought. "He used that?"

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The woman said something to Mr. Wang and laughed.

The old man smiled, then he twisted and looked directly at the armor and weapon hanging from the wall. He spoke softly at some length.

Susie Q turned back to Montin. "He says yes, he use bow many times in place of pale sun. . . . He say he carve bow 250 years ago in that place. . . ."

For a moment, Montin thought they were joking, but neither the woman nor the old man smiled. Then he grinned, realizing she must've fucked up the translation. Two hundred fifty? Mr. Wang was old, but *not* ancient.

Mr. Wang said something to Susie Q.

She pulled out a stool and asked Montin to sit down.

The old man spread out a drawing on the table, smaller but the same style as the larger ones on the walls, saying something to the woman.

"He say, call him *dragon.*"

Montin's pulse raced. This one was more like Gunny Hank's tattoo. Powerful. It made the usual serpentlike dragon look effeminate. More primitive . . . like a dinosaur, a great lizard creature with indigo scales and glistening silver wings . . . and the eyes. They were black, darker than night fallen in on itself. The damn thing appeared almost ready to leap off the paper. . . . It was alive. He sucked in a breath and whispered, "My God," knowing this indeed was the talisman he sought. It was *him.*

Mr. Wang spoke again, plugging needles into his electrical instrument, his tone taking on weight.

"He say charm only to be used against evil."

Montin blinked, unable to tear his gaze from the dragon, but he recognized the gravity of tone, knew the old man was spelling out some kind of serious admonition: *Only use against evil.* Hey, them V.C. were some evil mothers. "Tell him no sweat."

Mr. Wang leaned closer to Montin, speaking directly, as if Montin could understand, the old man's wrinkled brown face appearing brittle as parchment, but his eyes bright and alive.

"He say, 'Soon *you* dragon,'" Susie Q explained in an almost reverent tone. "Take off shirt, Mon-teen."

The old man bowed his head and murmured something else — a prayer? Then he looked up, smiled, and dipped the tatttooing needles into a vial of indigo ink. . . .

In less than an hour, the old man was finished. Montin had the strange

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creature tattooed above his heart; and in the palm of his hand, two Chinese characters: 龍兒. . The experience was intoxicating, and Susie Q's description of someplace under a pale sun was confusing, vague. All he recalled was a procedure of placing the ideograms in direct contact with the creature, and an incantation in Chinese that meant: *Awaken Dragon.*

MONTIN SHIFTED position, relieving a cramp in his right leg, but keeping himself hidden and his M-16 in position to fire. He was tired and sweaty, and the fucking mosquitoes were eating him alive. He was beginning to think the ambush was a waste of time. His squad had set up around midnight, about six klicks southeast of base camp, spread along the trail leading down to some no-name village. He was point, first contact; but he'd seen nothing except shadows and bugs. He squinted and looked down at his wristwatch: 5:05. It would be light soon, and no Charlie then. Thank God, he prayed silently, my luck is holding. Since returning from R and R, he hadn't been involved in even one firefight. Oh, base camp had been hit by rockets a couple of times, but that was a piece of cake. He grinned. Maybe G-2 had fucked up about the Cong patrol coming back to this village tonight—

Holy shit! He'd seen something move. Shadows were creeping along the trail. He peered intently, holding his breath and squinting, trying to get a count. Quietly, the shadows separated, moving closer. . . . Six, he decided; there were six of them. His heart thumped in his throat. Then he remembered the string, and jerked it six times, alerting Big O, the next Marine in line to his left, about twenty feet away and hidden in a swale of thick bamboo. Carefully, Montin eased off the safety on his M-16, and searched the tip of his right boot for the wire leading to the trip flare. But he hesitated, remembering the briefing. G-2 had emphatically indicated twelve V.C. He still counted only six. . . . Where were the rest of 'em? Jesus, he couldn't trip the flare, or fire, either. Then he recalled his talisman, and he brought his right palm up close to his face, the two ideograms. He slid his hand inside his utility shirt near his heart. . . . What were the words—? They flashed into his head, and he mouthed the incantation: *Awaken Dragon.* For a moment his hand seemed to fuse to his chest, then he felt a tingling in his fingertips, and his hand went numb. The dead feeling traveled up his arm into his shoulder and constricted his throat, making his vision swim. He blinked, the six figures collapsing into a shadowy

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blob. He was losing consciousness, and fought to control himself. . . . It was no use. He dropped down, down —

Blackness.

Montin groaned, his vision clearing slowly. He took a deep breath, regaining sensation in his arms, flexing the fingers of his right hand. *God.* He searched the trail. . . . They were gone! Just like those rumors about Gunny Hank —

Big O was at his side, lying prone with his M-16 cradled across his arms. Face beaded with sweat, his eyes widened. "What's up, man?" Big O whispered, his voice thick with fear. "What you see?"

"I, I, I . . . ," stammered Montin, pointing at the empty trail. "I thought I saw Charlie."

"What the fuck," Big O said, peering anxiously up the empty trail. "Nothin' there, man." He looked up into Montin's face, the tension easing, and said, "Better lay off the Thai shit. . . ."

Montin nodded, feeling sheepish as Big O crawled back into the bamboo break. . . . But he knew what he'd seen. He glanced at the two Chinese characters in his hand. And he knew that he'd been momentarily transported out of the jungle to . . . to a place with a pale sun. But it was so vague, like a distant dream. And the dragon? He shook his head and shivered despite the heat.

Twice more Montin awakened the dragon, both times against NVA regulars on search-and-destroy. Each time, he experienced a loss of consciousness, awakening to find the enemy *gone.* He tried to reconstruct what had happened during the seizure . . . but all he knew was that he had been transported elsewhere, then back. In December, Montin completed his tour, sold off all his good-luck charms except one, and returned home. He was discharged from the USMC a changed man.

Montin hooked his roller on the screen in the five-gallon bucket of flat white paint, stood back up straight, and shrugged his shoulders. He rotated his head slowly, trying to ease the ache in his upper body. It was a good thing they switched jobs daily on the painting crew.

"Hey, Kenny," Rodrigo whispered in a conspiratorial tone, leaning around the corner from the hall where he was working. He was cutting-in the angles with a brush, keeping ahead of the other three on the crew working rollers — Kenny on ceilings, the Mancini brothers on walls.

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"How 'bout a beer at the Lounge later?" the ex-prizefighter asked, the ever-present grin contradicting the hostile appearance of his flattened nose and scarred face. Rod let his voice rise in pitch. "Man, they got a new cocktail waitress —" He made a gripping gesture with both hands in front of his chest. "— And she's got the most righteous set of stand-up jugs you wouldn't believe, Kenny."

Montin laughed and nodded. He didn't know whether to believe Rodrigo when it came to describing the charms of any lady. They all had righteous jugs or buns or legs or something. But a cold beer would hit the spot — except, Rod didn't mean *one*. Twice in the past few days, they'd closed the bars. He thought about Cece, knowing he should feel at least a twinge of guilt leaving his pregnant wife home all alone. But he didn't.

Rod disappeared back down the hall. Montin moved his bucket and roller down the hall to the far bedroom, a step ahead of the Mancini boys — Nick and Andy. He could hear Rod humming in the last bedroom. Montin shook his head. Rodrigo never seemed to get tired or bored, no matter how tough the work. He sighed. He was bored to death. In six months since returning from 'Nam, he'd slipped into a routine of work, eat, sleep; work, eat, sleep. Yeah, he and Cece had got married. So what? She was pregnant now, which really locked him into the routine. He should feel thankful, he knew, since it was Cece's Uncle Angelo who had given him a job on the paint crew. Other vets weren't doing so hot. But he felt . . . fucked! It was the same shit every day. At least back in 'Nam, there was some variety. At times now he understood why some of them, like Gunny Hank, stayed in the Crotch, doing 'Nam a second and third time. The war had changed him. He just couldn't relate to his family or old friends, even Cece. He was different.

He touched his chest above his heart. . . . God, he'd almost forgotten about Hong Kong, until last week. He and Rod and gone across town to a biker dive to shoot pool. One thing led to another, and they got into a hassle with this big dude with huge arms sticking out of his denim vest. He tried to smash Rod with the butt end of a cue, but the stick glanced off the ex-fighter's shoulder, splitting his ear and pissing him off. At that point, Montin had automatically reached into his shirt, when it appeared two more bikers were going to jump Rodrigo's ass. But everyone froze in their tracks when he shouted, "Cool it!" Maybe it was his expression, or they thought he was reaching for heat, or maybe they just had second

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thoughts about tangling with Rodrigo. In any event, everyone stood by and watched Rod, who was five eight and weighed 150, stomp the crap out of the biker, who looked like a heavyweight wrestler. And Montin never whispered the incantation. . . .

At Mel and Yuka's Pelican Lounge, Montin stared in disbelief as the new cocktail waitress took a deep breath and balanced a short beer atop each of her massive uplifted breasts . . . to a round of hearty approval by the crowd of construction workers and mailmen just off work. The waitress smiled and shivered. "The beer is ice cold." Then she looked around innocently and asked, "Anyone care for one?" The crowd roared and ordered beers faster than she could carry them.

Rodrigo tapped Montin's shoulder and asked, "Righteous—?"

"O.K., you were right, Rod," admitted Montin, taking another look at the waitress in the modified playbunny outfit. After half a dozen trips back and forth to the bar, she finally had a beer in front of everyone.

The two friends worked their way up to the bar as the crowd settled down, someone punching in a Merle Haggard tune on the jukebox. Rodrigo leaned forward, catching the bartender's eye. "Hey, Mel, give us a couple of Miller drafts down here."

"Sure thing, Rod."

They rested comfortably against the padded bar, surveying the crowd, enjoying the air-conditioned coolness and Hag's sad, masculine voice. Montin sipped his beer as his friend got involved in a game of liar dice with the guy next to him. Absently watching his friend shake the dice box, Montin thought: This is my only respite; this is it. He recalled the morning's quarrel with Cece. He'd tried to explain it all, but she wouldn't listen. She just cussed his friend Rod, threatening to get him fired if Montin continued to hang out with him. He didn't think she had the nerve to carry through with her uncle, but he wasn't sure. She'd been doing funny things since finding out about the baby.

It was 2:15 A.M. when Montin finally reached home.

The next morning, Montin was hung over and a little late for work. Old Man Mancini was leaning against his blue Ranger with the white logo on the door: MANCINI & SONS PAINTING. He beckoned as Montin slid out of his Camaro. "Kenny, can I see you?"

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Montin approached the boss.

"Sit down, Kenny," Mancini said, indicating the running board under the door. He ran his fingers through his thick shock of white hair and grinned his Cesar Romero smile. "Now, you know how much me and the boys think of you, Kenny?" the old man began. Then he nodded as if confirming his own evaluation. "Yeah, you gonna be a good painter someday. Get a little faster, be a little more careful, maybe a little more dependable —" He glanced at his watch.

Ignoring his pounding head, Montin stared into his boss's face, trying to understand the point of the lecture.

Then Mancini nodded again. "Yeah, a good boy." He patted Montin's shoulder affectionately. "But," he added, his features hardening. "But a man needs his rest . . . 'specially a family man, you know."

Montin remained silent.

The old man continued, "You gonna be a good painter, Kenny, for Cece's sake and the baby, you understand." His hard expression eased. "How's my Cece?"

"She's fine, Mr. Mancini," Montin said after clearing his throat. He wondered if the old man was threatening him.

"That's good, Kenny," Mancini said, helping Montin to his feet. "But you call me Uncle Angelo, O.K.?"

Montin nodded.

Then the old man made a shooing gesture. "You're late, Kenny; you better get to work."

Montin made his way to the temporary paint shed and got his equipment. He soon found Nick and Andy in one of the tract houses, already hard at it. But no Rodrigo.

"Where's Rod?" he asked Andy, who was cutting-in ahead of his brother Nick.

"Quit," Andy replied, stopping and looking at his watch. "And we're short till Dad gets another man; so you can roll ceilings."

Montin didn't argue that he'd been on ceilings yesterday. He just went to work, wondering what had happened to his friend. Had Cece really bitched to her uncle? He'd heard rumors that the old boy was well-connected and nobody to mess with. . . . The little talk was making more sense now.

* * *

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MONTIN WOKE up late Sunday morning feeling depressed. "Cece?" he yelled, kicking off the covers. It was time for a showdown.

No answer.

He wandered out of the bedroom to the kitchen, wearing only his boxer shorts. At the kitchen counter, he found his wife, sitting like a zombie in her faded yellow bathrobe, sipping coffee, and staring at the portable Sony with earplugs jammed into her ears.

"Hey," Montin shouted, reaching over and turning off the TV. He pointed at her cup. "How 'bout some coffee?"

She cracked a suffering-heroine smile. "I only made two cups, which I've drunk. I wasn't sure when you'd be up . . . since you were out half the night," she said, her tone accusatory. "I haven't seen you for a couple of nights, you know," she added, reaching out and touching the tattoo over his heart.

Her touch felt rough and hot to Montin, and he flinched involuntarily, a sense of revulsion creeping over him. "I was looking for Rod," he explained, growing angry. "I don't know what's happened to him." He glared at his wife, and for a moment he thought she was going to smirk — her little-girl-ain't-I-proud-of-myself smile. But she glanced away and got up.

"Do you want eggs with your coffee?" she asked softly.

He found the Excedrin bottle in the junk drawer and shook out two tablets. "No," he said between sips of water. He turned from the sink and watched Cece move around the kitchen, the clumsy moves of a very heavy, tired person. And he noticed a smudge of jam or something on her upper lip, and it annoyed him. Jesus, he thought, dropping his gaze. Most women glowed during pregnancy, their cheeks rosy, their eyes sparkling — but not Cece. She looks like an old cow. He shook his head, recalling his original train of thought coming to the kitchen. "We have to talk about Angelo."

She frowned and slumped back on the stool, her robe falling open. Something about the sight of her breast — a pale, full orb — made Montin uneasy. He swallowed, trying to ease the dryness in his mouth, wondering what he had ever found attractive about this woman. He closed his eyes, shutting out the revolting sight of her, and cleared his throat. "What did he do to Rod?"

She smiled innocently. "I didn't know Uncle Angelo had anything to do with that."

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He could feel himself losing control. He sucked in a deep breath and growled, "Goddammit, you know, because you asked him—"

"I did no such thing!" Cece shook her head vigorously.

"Don't give me that shit," Montin shouted, picking up a dish towel and flinging it into her face. "Wipe that fucking jam off your fat face." Still shaking with anger, he turned away from his teary-eyed wife and headed to the bedroom to dress, yelling over his shoulder, "I'm going out to look for Rod."

Several hours later Montin returned home, thoroughly discouraged. At the door into his apartment, he paused. With her hair neatly combed, and wearing a fresh gingham dress, Cece was sitting at the kitchen counter like a queen, entertaining Uncle Angelo.

The old man held up an empty glass to Montin, "*Salud!*"

Cece's eyes sparkled; her cheeks glistened a deep pink. She filled Montin's glass from a nearly empty wine bottle.

He sat down, wondering what the two had cooked up now.

"Uncle Angelo expects to add another crew by the end of the year, Kenny," Cece announced breathlessly, her words slurred slightly. "And Nick wants to go south back to school. *You* might be running that crew."

Sure, Montin thought, sipping his wine, if I forget about what happened to Rod.

Mancini gestured with the bottle toward Montin's glass, and when Montin shook his head, the old man poured the last of the wine into his own glass. "That's right, Kenny." He took a sip, then frowned. "Cece tells me you're worried about Rodrigo quitting suddenly. He went to Reno to work with his brother."

Rod didn't have a brother in Reno, Montin thought, cold rage sweeping over him. He ignored his own wineglass, shut his ears to the lies of his wife and her uncle, who sipped their wine as if the world turned to their instructions. Looking at the smug expression on Mancini's face, Montin knew something terrible had happened to his friend. His control snapped. Like to make people disappear? Well, see how you like this, you old fuck, he said silently, reaching into his shirt and whispering: *Awaken Dragon.* The numbing chill swept up his arm, the feeling piercing his brain. For a moment he tried to cling to consciousness, relish the looks of fear on their faces, but he couldn't hold back the darkness. He slipped down—

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Blackness.

Montin blinked, focusing on the empty wine bottle. They were gone. "Cece?" he whispered, expecting no answer.

Responding to Cece's aunt's call, they came the next night for him, and found him staring at the Sony, empty potato chip bags littering the floor, the countertop covered with a mound of bent beer cans. They read him his *Miranda* rights, then took him to the station. The men in suits questioned him for a long time, asking the same things over and over. Of course he told them nothing of the dragon, and he kept his palm hidden in a fist.... Finally the suits gave up and sent him to a tiny cell — dimly lit, with a barred window, a stained commode with no seat, a bunk bed with a filthy mattress cover and frayed blanket. He smiled wryly to himself. He had no intention of staying in this depressing place. He opened his clenched fist and pressed the characters on the tattoo: *Awaken Dragon.*

Something jars him awake, a vague perception of *anger.* Instantly he realizes he's been transformed. Even in the darkness, from tactile and kinesthetic feedback, he senses a vast difference in his body — larger and more powerful. His eyes adjust. He's in a huge cave. He stirs his body to action, moving deftly around the pile of bones to the mouth of the cave, which opens out onto a sheer cliff face, overlooking the boulder-strewn steppe. Cold light from the pale sun strikes him, and he shrugs. *Anger.* The hot perception emanates from a pair of dots on the horizon, humans on horseback, moving in a direct line toward the cliff face. He draws back a few steps, out of the pale light, but still able to watch the riders approach. Closer, closer, closer. One of the riders is very tall, but moving gracefully in the saddle, one with the mount. A woman. The other rider wears battle gear and carries a longbow. The man is the source of the perception of hot anger.

Finally the riders stop about fifty yards from the foot of the cliff and dismount, the woman taking the reins of both horses. The man, in full armor, approaches a few steps, then pauses and shakes his longbow at the cave: *Only against evil.*

In the darkness of the cave, he steels himself, then moves out on the ledge, spreading his wings, preparing to swoop down on the puny pair of humans —

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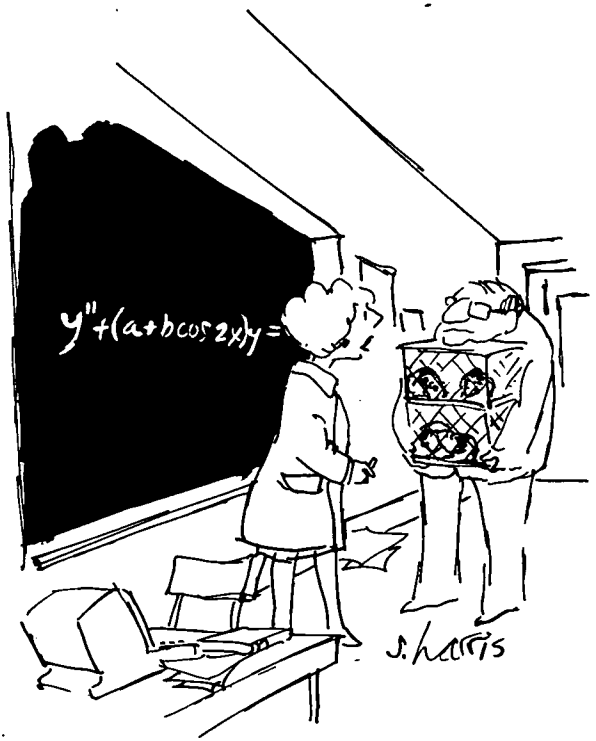
Halt.

It is a command from the mind of the woman. Her eyes glitter, and her gaze locks him in place. He can't move. Just at the edge of his frozen visual field, he sees the man notch an arrow and draw back on the longbow, the tip of the arrow glistening in the pale light like the woman's metallic eyes. Then the arrow is looping upward and striking him square in the chest —a shaft of ice into his heart. Only then does the woman release him from the grip of her gaze.

He sinks to his knees as the blackness folds around him. Cold, so very cold.... His life slips away, and he clings to the memory of the other place, the place with the warm, bright sun.



"I realize it was a bargain, but we just don't use guinea pigs in math."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

JUST SAY "NO"?

SOME WEEKS ago, I was attending a function in New York and a friend of mine from the sticks was present. He had once lived in New York City but was now living in a place I shall call "Sleepy Hollow," for that is not its name.

My friend favored me with a long tirade on the nastiness and unpleasantness of New York City — mentioning its noise, its dirt, its crowds — and contrasted it with the bucolic charm and rustic delights of Sleepy Hollow.

I listened with pained patience. I am used to people from outside the city who come to the city (in order to do *something* with their lives, since the chief intellectual activity in Sleepy Hollow is collecting a tan) and then throwing scorn upon it.

Afterward, though, I thought: Why *should* I listen with pained patience and endure the insults? Why don't I answer with something like the following —

"See here. You are in my city. You are speaking to a person who was brought up in this city, lives here, and loves it. You are speaking to one who finds it, despite its faults and problems, the most stimulating environment ever invented by humanity. My life is filled with variety and adventure because I live in this city, for just walking its crowded, noisy, dirty, smelly streets introduces me to a microcosm of the world, and to all its peoples and cultures. No one has asked you to come to New York City if you don't like it. You are welcome to stay in Sleepy Hollow where you can satisfy your need for excitement by indulging in deep-breathing exercises. But if you do come here, because every once in a while you want to experience life, please keep a civil tongue in your head and don't insult my city."

I don't know if I can actually ever bring myself to say something

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like that. It would be impolite. It would also be impolite for me to visit Sleepy Hollow and say to its inhabitants, "What do you [yawn] do around here? Is there any place to [yawn] go, or [yawn] anything amusing and interesting? Whom do you speak to after you've exhausted your three [yawn] neighbors?"

The trouble is that New Yorkers are polite people who don't do things like that. We leave it to out-of-towners.

And then, this last weekend I had my chance. I was at a resort hotel upstate [yes, I leave Manhattan now and then for short distances — under duress] and listened to a lecture on the New York City water system. It was an excellent address, but the speaker somehow got the idea that he was addressing a rustic, upstate crowd.

He explained that he had been born and brought up in New York City but that, "in 1970, I was privileged to leave the city for these wonderful country surroundings."

He was just stroking what he conceived to be the audience, but I stiffened in my front-row seat. I waited for the question period, but, it turned out, I didn't have to. Somewhere in the course of his speech, it occurred to him to wonder whether anyone in the audience was actually from New York City. "How many of you live in New York City?" he asked.

Half the hands shot up, mine among them, of course, and my voice rang out in unmistakable hostility, "We haven't been *privileged* to leave our city, sir."

I'll give him credit. He caught the faux pas at once and apologized.

But it got me to thinking about a number of things, and, if you don't mind [or even if you do], I'm going to devote this essay to nonscientific comments and express my views on certain social phenomena. You may not see that what I am about to say has anything to do with insulting New York City, but I promise you that I will tie it all together before I am through.

On June 3, 1972, I was receiving an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Alfred University in south-central New York State. On the program with me, and delivering the commencement address, was Rod Serling, who was getting a degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. [Mine were inhumane, I suppose.]

It was the second time I had met him, and I was terribly pleased for I was a great admirer of his "Twilight Zone" television program.

Now suppose that, as we were both sitting there in the dais during the commencement exercises, some trouble-making demon had whispered in my ear, "In three years, one of

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the two, Serling or yourself, will be dead."

I'm afraid I would have gone into a decline, for the odds that death would tap me rather than Serling would have seemed to me to be very high. To begin with, Serling was five years younger than I was. Secondly, Serling was slim and highly tanned. Undoubtedly, he took care of himself physically, working out, eating abstemiously, and so on. I, in contrast, was flabby, plump and pale. I lived an absolutely sedentary life in front of my typewriter, and when I fell out of bed in the morning, I felt that to be sufficient exercise for the day.

To be sure, Serling was a hard-driving man with a life that was full of deadlines and goals that had to be met — but my life was exactly that, too. In that respect, we were even.

And yet on June 29, 1975, Rod Serling died during open-heart surgery at the age of 50 — and I am still alive.

Why?

The answer is straightforward. Serling was a chain smoker from adolescence, and the smoking had turned his circulatory system into a set of breakable clay pipes. Everything he did to preserve his health, and everything I neglected to do to preserve mine* did not matter compared with the fact that he had smoked perpetually and I did not smoke at all.

Tobacco, after all, is an addictive drug and it does harm. It kills, by its direct and deleterious effect on the body, hundreds of thousands of Americans each year. It is the greatest cause of easily preventable death in the world.

Even before it kills (and the killing process is a slow one) tobacco smokers are, on the average, more often ill than nonsmokers are, have more respiratory problems, lose more work days, perform their work less efficiently when they do work, and overload the medical system of the United States unnecessarily.

Worse than all that, tobacco is one drug that directly affects more than the practitioner. Alcohol remains within the drinkers' own bodies, and so do other drugs. Tobacco smoke, however, after permeating the smokers' lungs, is released into the air for other people, who may be nonsmokers, to breathe.

It doesn't matter whether you draw the noxious smoke into your own lungs voluntarily, or breathe it involuntarily after it has emerged from someone else's lungs. In either case, it is toxic. A smoker may

*Let my readers rest easy. Since my own mild heart attack, I have reformed. I have lost weight; I exercise a bit; I eat with discretion, and so on.

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know the risk and prefer to give up, let us say, five years of life, for the fifty years of pleasure smoking might give. That's his business, and I agree to his right to accept such risks.

But why should nonsmokers be exposed? Each breath of smoke shortens life, and why should nonsmokers give up any part of their life for the sake of preserving the smoking pleasures of others.

(I do not mention the way in which the smoky effluvium clings to the clothes of nonsmokers, and how smoke in restaurants ruins the taste of food for nonsmokers. Smokers may, for all I know, enjoy stinking, and may get pleasure out of eating steak that tastes like old ashtrays, but not so the rest of us. Nor do I mention the number of fires, whether in forests, hotels, or homes, caused by smoldering cigarettes.)

Fortunately, the situation with regard to smoking is now well understood. Nonsmokers are fighting vigorously for their right to smoke-free air and are winning. I'm against the prohibition of smoking, of course. Everyone has a right to the death of his choice but only in places where that risk is not afflicted on others.

That brings me to alcohol. Smoking is only four centuries old where Europeans and their descendants are concerned, but alcohol consumption dates back to prehistoric days, and distilled liquors are about six centuries old.

I won't bother preaching on the harm alcohol does. There is probably no one in the United States who hasn't had some experience with alcoholics. Nor do I suggest we ought to take violent measures to prevent alcohol consumption. That was tried in the 1920's and proved a dismal failure.

However, ought we to have a society that openly encourages drinking, that, in fact, *insists* upon it?

I am constantly plagued with invitations to attend cocktail parties, for instance, and I am sometimes forced to attend them because it may be one that requires my presence, or because it is being held in honor of someone or something I cannot turn my back on, or because it is hosted by people or institutions to which I owe gratitude or loyalty.

At these cocktail parties, you are *expected* to drink. If I stand there with an empty hand, I am bombarded with an anxious chorus of "Can I get you something to drink?" What I usually do is to order a ginger ale, which has the virtue of looking like something alcoholic, and sip it slowly. If I can have a maraschino cherry thrown into it, all the better.

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I remember one cocktail party about twenty-five years ago, at which I was caught without a ginger ale in my hand. A woman approached me with a cocktail in one hand and a burning cigarette in the other. I automatically leaned away from her to avoid the smoke.

I suppose she noticed that, and having already consumed a number of cocktails, said to me, belligerently, "What's the matter? Don't you smoke?"

"No, I don't," I answered.

She said, "I suppose you don't drink either."

"No, I don't," I answered.

Whereupon she said, angrily, "Then what the hell *do* you do?"

And, in a normal speaking voice, I answered, "I f—k a lot."

That ended that conversation.

The point I'm making is that "social drinking" is encouraged as part of the niceties of life. I remember a couple on television talking about their return to nature — about living on a farm and indulging in the simple life. However, they explained, that didn't mean they weren't sophisticated. They "always had wine with their dinner."

Well, what's wrong with social drinking?

Just this — We live in a complicated technological world, and every one of us is constantly at risk. We depend on others for the workings of those machines and systems that supply us with the basic necessities of life, and we count on good judgment and efficiency.

When a ship strikes a reef and pours out millions of gallons of oil into the sea; when a train strikes a truck and is derailed; when a plane crashes shortly after take-off; when any of a thousand and one things go wrong — the fault may lie in circumstance, in untoward events, in the weather, in equipment failure, and so on.

On the other hand, it might also be the result of some personal factor. Someone made the wrong decision, reacted inappropriately or too slowly, missed something that should not have been missed.

Such things happen even to perfectly functioning human beings under the best of conditions, but they happen *more often* to drinkers. After all, you don't have to be dead drunk to bring about catastrophe. A social glass or two may be sufficient to dull one's senses, slow one's reflexes, dampen one's thinking mechanism, to where one is not quite on the ball.

By actually *encouraging* people to swim in an alcoholic haze, our society is asking for all sorts of disasters.

Let me interrupt myself just a bit in order to avoid playing a

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holier-than-thou role. For a variety of reasons, I have never learned to smoke and drink, but I have my drug, too. It is called "writing."

It has all the qualities of a drug. It is addictive. I can't stop writing. If circumstances force me away from my typewriter, I quickly develop withdrawal symptoms. While I am writing, I experience a "high." The cares of the day vanish and life becomes a lark. You might even argue that my writing, like smoking and drinking, has a deleterious effect on my health, for it forces me into a sedentary life, which has a tendency to make me fat and flabby and to underutilize my muscles.

It even causes me to neglect alternate pleasures. Despite what I said to the woman at the cocktail party, I am not an inveterate sex addict. I have the impulse to be one, but, as I have frequently said, "You can be a Don Juan, or you can publish 434 books; you can't do both." Well, long ago, I made my choice. Someone once asked me, "If you had your choice, Dr. Asimov, would it be women or writing?" My answer was, "Well, I can write for twelve hours at a time without getting tired."

Yet there is a difference. If I were to smoke or drink, I would, in neither case, serve humanity in any way by indulgence in my vice. If, in sudden enthusiasm, I increased my output of cigarette ash or of empty cocktail glasses, no one in the world would be benefited.

I like to think, however, that my writing addiction is useful, that what it produces gives pleasure to other people. Surely, that's something.

Now I'm ready to go back to my friend from Sleepy Hollow.

As I write this, there is a great surge of East Germans working their way into West Germany. Presumably, they are moving in the direction of greater freedom. They are also moving in the direction of a higher standard of living, and I must confess that I'm not sure which is the true driving force.

The reason I'm not sure is that there is a similar movement in the United States, where it is obvious that the motion is not in the direction of greater freedom, but in that of what is seen as a better life. The middle classes are leaving the older cities and are flooding into the suburbs and exurbs.

The escapees in this case are not in search of a right to vote; they're not fleeing the all pervasive eyes of the secret police. They're simply heading for swimming pools, for manicured lawns, for good schools and safe neighborhoods, for golf courses.

It is difficult to blame them, but

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consider that the flight from the city is the flight of the middle class, the substantial citizens, the tax paying elite. Into the city flock the poor and dispossessed in search of whatever fragments the city can afford them.

The result is that from year to year, the population of the older cities includes a larger percentage of the poor and dispossessed, who do not, and cannot, pay substantial taxes, but who, in fact, require welfare and help of various sorts. The population also includes a steadily smaller percentage of the settled, better off element.

As a result, the tax base of the cities erodes, the cities become shabbier and decay more rapidly, and those people who have remained, but who can afford to leave, are ever more anxious to do so. The change for the worse thus accelerates.

Now, then, do the suburbanites worry about this? I presume that many do, but I also presume that many don't. I think that the general mood of the country is that cities are festering sores the nation would be better off without. I am even cynical enough to get the feeling that some of the escapees are delighted the cities are doing so badly and, far from wanting to help them, are eager to shove them further into the mire.

Why should this be? Well, when I was young I would occasionally go to some summer resort in the mountains for a week or two in the heat of mid-summer. I couldn't help but notice that whenever a new batch of city people would arrive, everyone who was already there would ask eagerly, "How is it in the city?"

I decided I knew why the question was asked. I checked it out and I was right. Whenever I came in and was asked the question, I would answer (regardless of the true facts), "The weather in the city was wonderful. It was mild and dry. I hated to leave."

I would then watch their faces fall and their lips being chewed. They were spending money on a vacation, and there was no value in it unless it was clear that those who were *not* on vacation were being tortured by horrible weather.

It was the old Hollywood slogan: "It's not enough to succeed; your friends have to fail."

Of course, when other newcomers would tell the truth about the city and discuss the heat and humidity, the vacationers would perk right up and smile and revel in the misery of the millions.

It's human nature. Some would call it bestial, but it isn't, for animals are not like that. It's *human* nature.

So it is not enough for the Sleepy

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Hollow people to enjoy their lawns and trees and quiet and fresh air. They must come into New York and talk about the dirt and the noise and the smells and the danger. Every bit of these bad things makes them feel smarter about escaping. The greater the contrast, the better off they are. So they don't care if the city is going to hell. The faster, the better. They'll enjoy their suntans more.

Now let's get back to the city. The East Germans can escape to West Germany with its greater freedom and higher standard of living. Poor people all over the world, hungry people, frightened people, weary people, hopeless people, have a dream. Some day they may be able to find their way to the United States — the richest country in the world, the most advanced, the freest.

This is no illusion, no useless dream. My parents and I, many years ago, came to this country as penniless immigrants, and I lived the American dream and became a substantial citizen.

So it is that across our borders come people from Mexico, from Central America, from southeast Asia, from eastern Europe, from everywhere, all with the dream in their heart.

Now tell me, where do the poor and downtrodden, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, who are right here in the great American cities (and some of whom have been Americans for generations) — where do *they* go and what is *their* dream? There is no other country they can dream of going to, for they are already in the country of everyone's dreams. Only they haven't made it, and most of them know they're not going to make it.

Nor can they do as other American city-folk do and escape to the beautiful neighborhoods of the suburbs and the surrounding countryside. They haven't got the money for it and, to tell the truth, the people who have escaped already are not anxious to have the dregs of humanity follow them. Yonkers nearly went bankrupt rather than agree to build low-cost housing among the affluent.

What's more, the poor in other countries know that they are living in poor countries. They know that not only they but just about everyone is on the edge of starvation. The poor in the United States, on the other hand, are daily told on all sides that the United States is rich and wonderful. The movies and television constantly show them what happy lives people are leading. The poor and the hopeless are made to feel alone and imprisoned by misery in the midst of a victorious and wealthy and endlessly self-congratulating society.

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So what do the poor do, short of rising in rebellion and being shot down by the forces of society? They've got to feel better *somehow*.

They turn to drugs. Why not? All the yuppies have their cigarettes and cocktails despite their good life, and the poor smoke and drink too. But the poor need something that will work faster and kick them up higher, and that means heroin, cocaine, and crack.

Now the people of the United States have decided that the drug epidemic is the greatest danger facing the country, especially since it is spreading into the suburbs, and a great many of the beautiful people are snorting the occasional social cocaine along with their social cocktails.

But what is the cause of the epidemic? Well, *partly* it's the decline of the cities as the middle class moves out and procedes to disown the city and tell it (as ex-President Ford was once supposed to have told New York City) to "drop dead."

The deeper cause, of course, is the imbalance of our society. The Reagan administration felt that the best thing to do was to help those who were well-off; to lower their taxes, turn a blind eye to their unethical practices, in the hope that the endless money they accumulated would trickle down to the poor and improve their lot.

That made for a lot of popularity for Reagan, but it didn't work, just the same. The rich indeed grew richer under Reagan (I did, too), but the poor have grown poorer and more numerous.

And how do you treat the drug addiction that is forced on people by sheer hopelessness? Nancy Reagan had a solution: "Just say 'No'!" It's my opinion that Nancy couldn't possibly say "No!" to a new dress or to a new astrologer, but she expected miserable humanity to say "No!" to the only thing that made them feel good.

What else? Put extreme pressure on Colombia to suppress its drug lords? Send them some helicopters and tell them to endure the bombings and the assassinations by outlaws who have enough money to buy up most of the police force and the politicians and murder the rest? Do you think they will really do this?

For goodness sake, we banned the production and sale of alcoholic beverages in 1920, and the United States was at once converted into a gangster-ridden society, with gang wars and endless crime. Did we fight it? Did we handle it? Yes, indeed. You know how? We gave up and, in 1933, made alcoholic beverages legal again.

Do we really expect Colombia

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to fight a war we couldn't fight, when Colombia is so much weaker than we, and their criminals so much stronger than ours? Surely, you jest.

So what to do? More force? More jails? More police power? Army involvement?

One, it might not work. It didn't during prohibition.

Two, it would be expensive, and since Reagan spent a trillion dollars building up the armed forces, and more than doubled the national debt to avoid taxes, and saddled us with a heavy unfavorable balance of trade to avoid inflation, the nation has lost its desire to spend money on *anything*.

Three, even if it were done and if it worked, it would mean an erosion of American liberties. We would become accustomed to police searches without warrants, to arrests on suspicion, to limitations of movement, etc. etc. And once lost, liberties are very hard to regain.

Well, then, what would *I* do? For one thing I'd like to end some of our hypocrisy. Tobacco and alcohol actually do more harm than the hard drugs, and I think that it is next to impossible to fight cocaine while our society pickles itself in smoke and marinates itself in alcohol. Let's do what we can to make a drug-free society, and I mean *drug-free*.

And how do we do that? I don't see any way of doing it but to change society so that the rich aren't as rich and the poor aren't as poor. Surely it can't be part of the American ideal to have a few people at one end swimming in wealth, while millions at the other end have no homes and have to eat out of garbage cans.

But will we do this? Will we even try to do this?

Not as long as substantial citizens turn away from the cities and, from a safe distance, laugh and sneer at them. Not as long as we elect people who feel that helping the rich will somehow, at some future time, help the poor. Not so long as "liberal" is a dirty word, because liberals want to build a kinder, more gentle society.

And what do I think that the conservatives in control would say to these notions of mine? Why, I think they would "just say 'No!'" and, in that case, I strongly suspect that the United States would continue to lose the fight against drugs and all hope of recovery from this crisis of ours.

Editor's note: Responses to this essay are welcome and will be published in an upcoming issue. Please try to keep them to a maximum of 400 words.

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Robert Reed, "Busybody" (January 1990), returns with a moving story about a family farming in the remains of a city park, trying to sort out the painful puzzle that exists on an Earth maimed by aliens.

CHAFF

By Robert Reed

I

TESS WASN'T EVEN ANGRY. At least not like yesterday, or like that time last week. Not hardly. But she came across the parking lot in a black mood, one leg kicking and the skateboard wheels humming and her thin shadow stretching out ahead. She heard Mr. Bumpers behind her. He made soft, plaintive sounds, but she wouldn't slow down. Not even for him. Her mood made her want to keep moving. The faster the better. And she kicked again. One good crisp kick, then she put both feet on the board and held it straight. She kept herself on a straight course, cutting across the flat parking lot toward the market.

Ka-*thunk*, ka-*thunk*.

There were cracks in the pavement, and vigorous green weeds stood in the cracks, rising taller every year. We should raise weeds, thought Tess. Not corn or tomatoes or the rest of it. If we had gardens full of ragweed and

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thistle, she reasoned, then there wouldn't be all the idiotic chores to do every day. Weeds didn't care when they were watered. They didn't mind bugs or the heat. What would Father do if she suggested a weed garden? If she pretended to be sincere? He'd probably roll his eyes and growl, like always, and they'd get into another fight about her attitude and how their lives were so marginal. That's what would happen. "It's not a sweet world," he would inform her. "Tess? You have to work, and hard, if you want to survive. The two of us have to pull together. We don't have any choice in the matter."

Ka-*thunk-thunk* went the big wheels on Mr. Bumpers's cart. Tess kicked again, twice, and heard him whimper as he fell farther behind. She started to think about the chores she was expected to finish today, and all the drudgery involved, and the way her father had snapped at her this morning. Like always, she had taken too long to dress and eat breakfast. And like always, she wasn't studying the damned schoolbooks enough at night. As if book learning mattered these days. As if anyone cared that she could divide numbers or read dead people's writing. God, how she hated criticism. Particularly her father's. He always knew the right way to do everything, the absolute best way, and her vote didn't count. Not for shit. She was Perry Grisson's daughter, and she lived in Perry Grisson's house. She didn't have an identity for herself. She was expected to do the work —the endless, boring, oftentimes pointless work — and he gave her a bed and food. Grudgingly. Everything inside and around the house belonged to Perry Grisson. Even Tess, it seemed. She was his slave. His property. And he never let her forget it, either.

Again Tess kicked, almost to the market now. A handful of cars and little trucks were parked along the curb — dirty, alcohol-burning vehicles sometimes built from assorted parts, hoods and fenders and tires sometimes badly mismatched. The market itself seemed quiet at this early hour. The plywood windows were propped open, letting the wind get inside. She heard a voice from the gloom, brief and distant. Then there was a gust, and the roof shuddered — a brightly colored, tentlike roof made from balloon fabric — and Tess felt dust in the air, the wind driving it against her face.

This was going to be another brutally hot day.

Already she could feel the heat. It seemed to rise from the pavement more than it fell from the sun, and she found herself blinking and squinting from the sweat in her eyes.

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Mr. Bumpers kept whimpering. Tess had heard him all along, and now she braked by touching the ground with one foot, her oversized basketball shoe slipping across gravel, and the skateboard making a smooth turn in front of the market's door. "Mr. Bumpers!" she cried. "Is that you calling, sweetie?" Her mood began to soften. At least a little bit. She looked at her dog as he rode in the old grocery cart — a stout dog with a gray muzzle, cloudy eyes, and vague breeding. A wide-brimmed hat was secured to his head, and he lay on his favorite blanket, panting. Mr. Bumpers lacked a right front paw. The aliens had severed his leg just below the elbow, the wound unnaturally neat. Like every alien-made wound, she knew. The dog's left leg, by contrast, was muscled and accustomed to balancing him as he walked in his jerky fashion. Tess took Mr. Bumpers everywhere she went, letting him ride in the cart whenever it was a long trip. Like now. The cart was four wheels and a set of wire baskets, its electric motor humming, and its single eye pivoting in the socket — glassy and black and unblinking.

Tess said, "Bumpers," and pulled her dog from the basket.

He whined and licked her face, slobber everywhere. Father, of course, had warned her not to bring him. Because of the heat. "But you're fine, aren't you?" she inquired. Mr. Bumpers begged to be set down. He whined and twisted in her arms, and she set him on the ground and watched him run in his jerky fashion, making for the market's inviting shade.

Tess kicked the skateboard up into her hands and followed, the cart at her heels. The air inside turned colorful and a touch cooler. Sunlight streamed through the tent's emerald-and-scarlet-and-lemon fabric. She wiped sweat from her forehead and propped the board in a corner. Tess was fourteen years old — a tall girl with strong, long legs and her mother's face. People said she would grow up to be a lovely woman, although she couldn't see it herself. Not really. Some nights she sat in front of her mirror, watching herself and wondering when, if ever, she would get a woman's figure. And when would the zits heal? And who could ever think she was lovely if she grew even an inch taller? Who? Sometimes Tess felt as if the compliments were meant to tease her, nothing more. And she became so angry then, making fists and hitting herself in frustration.

She didn't look like her mother, she felt. Not really.

Her mother had been a beauty, a true beauty, and Tess remembered her whenever she walked the market's aisles. There was one particular mo-

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ment that was locked in her mind. It came from a day long before the aliens arrived, back when this was a grocery store, and the original roof was still intact, the aisles filled with shoppers, and the shelves stuffed with foods from around the world. Mother was walking in the memory, and Tess was riding a grocery cart that was keeping close to Mother. Then Mother stopped and turned and smiled at Tess — that's what was so clear, even now — and why did she remember that best of all? It made no sense. Tess must have spent a lot of splendid time with Mother, she felt. Sure. But that one moment, nice but ordinary, was the moment that stuck. Why?

The aliens had killed Mother. They had sucked her vital organs out of a small hole in her body, stealing them.

And the aliens had stolen a lot of this market, too. Its roof and the food from its shelves, she had heard. Plus odd things like household cleansers and vitamin pills, stock boys and patrons. Or portions thereof. They'd come out of the sky in bright ships, and nobody knew why they did it. Or how. Or what they did with the things they stole. Tess was just a six-year-old girl when they came, and her mother was killed. And her only brother, Alex, had vanished. Along with Mr. Bumpers's leg and a couple billion people worldwide. Give or take.

There were a lot of things that Tess didn't remember from those awful, crazy days.

She didn't remember burying her mother, for instance. Or the way she died. And she didn't recall the tiny puncture wound on the back of her own neck or the weakness she had felt for several days afterward. Father had told her those stories. Almost everyone had gotten some sort of wound. Most often they lost blood and some meat — nothing fatal — although there were plenty of people like poor Mother. And there were cripples, too. And nobody had a sensible reason as to what the aliens were after. At least nothing that made sense to Tess. Not even after all these years.

Eight years, and the world was a long, long way from healing itself.

The aliens had maimed it in the same way they had maimed Mr. Bumpers, and there was no use thinking about it too hard. Thinking didn't do any good. What was, was. Nobody would ever really know why it happened.

Tess paused for a moment, standing at the back of the store. Someone

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was speaking. It took her a moment to notice the voice. "Tess?" said someone. "Tess?" She blinked and turned and found Mr. Pendleton watching her. He was standing behind the big wooden table that served as his countertop, and he was smiling. "You're acting odd," he observed. "Were you out in the sun too long?"

"I'm just thinking," she told him. "That's all."

"Well, then," he allowed. "That's fine. You're allowed to think."

Mr. Pendleton owned and operated the market. He had claimed it during that first hard year, erecting the tent overhead and scavenging through the surrounding neighborhood to find his first products. He had had a large family before the aliens came, and some of them had survived. Cousins and a brother-in-law did nothing but comb the countryside, looking for anything worth anything. And his children helped him with running the market itself. They were nobody, these Pendletons, before the world was changed. But now, maybe more than anyone else, they were the closest thing to wealth in the area.

"What can I do for you, Tess?"

She didn't mind Mr. Pendleton. He didn't usually make her angry. Tess smiled and pulled a piece of dirty, wet paper from a pocket, saying, "Father wants some things. This stuff." And she handed it to him. He'd help her if she wanted. Which she did. "I can never find the stuff in here," she lied, and she brightened her smile.

"Well, let me, then." Mr. Pendleton tipped an imaginary hat on his head and gave a little bow. "All right?"

"Sure."

Sometimes Father and he fought. They fought about credit and the value of corn, and sometimes the words got personal. Even vicious. But they always seemed to forget what had been said; neither held a grudge. It was like a game. They needed each other, she supposed, and so they had to bury their feelings. All she knew for certain was that she liked to see them fight — she was thrilled to see someone else angry with her father — and even when she knew that Father was on her side, trying to win them more of something, she found herself rooting for Mr. Pendleton. Just to see her father knocked down a step or two. That was always fun.

She and Mr. Pendleton were walking the aisles, and Mr. Bumpers gave a whimper. Tess picked him up and said, "Look at you! How are you?", and kissed his belly. Mr. Pendleton was putting canned goods into the cart.

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Some long-haul, alcohol-burning truck had pulled through town the other day, traveling from the West Coast, and now the market had a good selection to choose from. Bright new cans labeled without fanfare. Father wanted them for their emergency stocks. Salmon, she noticed. And green beans. And something called tangerines . . . whatever they were. She shook that can hard, hearing juices, and then she dropped it back into the basket. *Thud!*

Mr. Bumpers squirmed until she held him with both arms.

"Machine parts, too, huh?" said Mr. Pendleton.

"I guess so."

A couple aisles held machine parts. Tess shadowed Mr. Pendleton and rarely paid attention. He put used rubber belts and greasy gears into the cart, then he wiped his hands clean on a stained rag. Then he smiled until she saw his smile, and he said, "Five pounds of venison?" as he pointed to the bottom of the list. "Is that what this says?" Your dad writes worse than anyone I know."

Tess laughed, nodding and saying, "Venison, yeah," and shrugging.

They went to the backmost corner of the market, and he opened a big refrigerator. The meat was wrapped in white paper, and he pulled one package and set it on top of the big gears and shiny cans. The cart's motor gave a prolonged whine as Tess walked away, struggling with the load, and she thought, Great! The batteries are going to die on me again. Just great!

Two people were standing near the front door. Tess knew one of them. Mr. Pendleton's son, Jack, was leaning against the mop. Like always. He was discussing something with a woman, a stranger, and smiling. Every other living Pendleton was a hard worker. Jack was the sole exception. Even one of his cousins, a poor little wisp of a girl, did twice as much work as he managed. And the aliens had stolen her legs.

Jack was a few years older than Tess. He had a round face and a big, chubby body, and he was saying, "I can ask Dad," with his distinctive voice. A wrong-sounding voice. He turned and said, "Dad? Do you know anyone who wants to hire help?"

Mr. Pendleton said, "Ma'am?", and tipped his imaginary hat.

The stranger was short and stocky. Perhaps twenty years old, perhaps older. Standing in a patch of scarlet-tinted sunlight, her hair looked tar black, and her flesh seemed raw.

"She wants work," Jack explained. "She's walking cross-country, passing

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through, and I told her we don't hire. We can't hire anyone—"

"Let her talk for herself, Jack. Why don't you let her?"

Jack blinked. His soft, feminine voice quit.

"My name's Paula Grant," said the girl. She shook his hand, telling him, "I know you don't know me. And I understand how tight things are. But if you can give me work, any work at all, I won't disappoint, and I'll ask only for room and board. Sir."

"Well said," Mr. Pendleton declared, "and I'm sorry. My boy is right. We don't hire anyone. We can't."

Her face showed nothing for a long moment. Then she blinked and said, "Maybe you could suggest someone who might hire help, sir. Is there anyone in the area?"

"As a matter of fact, there is."

Tess felt something coming.

"This dear creature here, for instance." Mr. Pendleton said, "She and her dad have got a magnificent garden not far from here. You can ask her dad. Perry Grisson. A real good friend of mine," he lied. "That's my best recommendation."

"Why, thank you, sir. Thanks." The Paula woman turned to Tess and said, "Maybe I could come with you," and she introduced herself all over again. As if Tess hadn't been standing here. "Could I tag along?"

Tess thought about telling the truth. Father didn't trust people enough to hire them. He had turned away a couple dozen strangers in these past years. Yet some part of Tess wondered how it would be to have a companion close to her age. Wouldn't it be fun? Maybe Father would say yes — God knew they needed the help — and then maybe the two of them could become allies. Wouldn't that be splendid? she thought. Sure.

"Come on," said Tess. "Come and ask him."

"Wonderful. Great!" The woman smiled, wasting a load of hope. Then she turned and said, "Nice meeting you, sir," to Mr. Pendleton. "And you too, Jack. It was pleasant talking to you."

"Ma'am," said Mr. Pendleton, tipping his imaginary hat again.

"Good luck," called Jack, looking at Paula with his sad, frank eyes. For just a moment. Then he grabbed the mop handle with both hands and started to work, pushing the mop across the dusty floor. His motions were strong and steady. It looked unnatural to see him working. Tess came very close to laughing aloud.

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II

MAYBE I shouldn't ask," said Paula, "but what's his problem?"

They were crossing the parking lot. The skateboard was on top of the venison, and Tess was pushing the cart because the batteries were spent. Again. "Jack Pendleton?" she said. "Is that who you mean?" Who else would she mean?

"His look, his voice . . . I'm just curious. That's all."

It was a delicious moment. Tess nodded and smiled, saying, "The aliens took just two things from him." She held up two fingers. "Guess what they took."

Paula blinked, but otherwise showed no surprise. Only pity. She sighed and glanced at the pavement, and Tess felt uncomfortable all at once. She scratched Mr. Bumpers's chin and adjusted his hat, distracting herself. Mr. Bumpers was riding peacefully in the child seat at the back of the cart, his blanket bunched up under him, and his slobber dropping to the bright concrete.

They didn't speak for a while.

Crossing an empty four-lane street, they reached a strip of little shops that once sold haircuts and water beds and other oddities. Now they were empty of anything useful, weather and time starting to tear the buildings down. Past them was a residential street climbing a soft grade. Homes and big apartment buildings stood in most of the lots. There were big trees and shaggy, weedy lawns and no trace of inhabitants. All the survivors had gone elsewhere, Tess knew. Nothing was left to hold them here.

Sometimes they passed lots where structures were missing, seemingly carved off the face of the Earth with giant knives. Paula glanced at the exposed foundations, shaking her head and pursing her lips. What was she thinking? Tess wondered. There was no telling. They came to a block where every tree had been stolen, trunks and roots and all; and Paula had to kneel once just to touch a gash left in the dried dirt, as if touching would tell her how it was done.

Tess had passed this place a million times. Yet all at once, seeing Paula's interest, she felt a sudden cool knot in her belly. Trees had stood here once, she was thinking. And aliens had plucked them right out of the ground. It took them all of a second, tops.

There were abandoned cars, too. Each one was at least partly dis-

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mantled, the remnants collapsing into rust. Aliens and then scavenging people had done the work. Father had told her stories about those days. But why, she wondered, would interstellar travelers need a Chevy V-6 engine? No one knew. And why would they pluck the headlights and windshield from a different car, then leave a perfectly good engine behind?

It was a endless puzzle. Crazy and tangled, and Tess didn't see any reason to waste time wondering why. Why car parts? Why a dog's leg and Jack Pendleton's testicles? Aliens were aliens, she reminded herself. They were beyond logic and motives. For all she knew, they did what they did to be cruel. Nothing else. They did it for the same reason she sometimes stomped on ant nests. For the sheer pleasure of it. Just to feel tiny bodies burst and to see the confused survivors racing around in the dust afterward, trying to put their lives back together again.

Paula asked, "Would you like help pushing that thing?" and touched Tess on the arm. Paula looked strong. She was carrying a pack on her back, and she wore jeans and a sun-bleached work shirt and a battered pair of first-class boots. "Just for a bit, I can do it."

Tess said, "No," practically snapping.

"You're sure?"

"I can manage," she replied. Then she bent into the weight as the hill became steeper near the top.

A pair of brick apartment buildings were on the corner. A few years ago, feeling curious, Tess had skipped out of chores to come here and look around. The aliens had punched holes in the walls and ceilings, seemingly at random. Human scavengers had taken most of the valuables that had remained. But Tess hadn't come for treasure. She wanted to see the furniture and beds of the vanished people. She looked into their closets and drawers and cupboards, gaining glimpses of how everyone had lived at one time. All those pretty, useless party clothes, and she had remembered Father's stories. In those times, people had gotten two days of rest every week. Two days where they could sleep and play and do nothing. Whatever. And even their work was easy. No physical labor under the hot sun, weeding and irrigating and killing bugs until your back ached. It was desk work inside refrigerated office buildings, fancy clothes and hot lunches and going home before dinner every day. Home to television and clean sheets. Tess could remember television, vaguely, and the feel of sheets in the middle of July. To sleep under sheets in summertime . . . it seemed

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remarkable now. Something so ordinary, and today it was a luxury. Not even the Pendletons could afford air-conditioning. Not even them.

There were still some corpses in those apartments. Or portions of corpses. The volunteer cleanup crews hadn't done a thorough job. Tess best remembered a mummified figure in an upstairs bathtub, naked and male, with one dead hand still gripping the pistol that he'd used to shoot himself in the head.

A lot of people had done the same thing, she knew.

Grief and hunger and all that stuff had made them do it. But later, asking Father about suicides, he claimed that he'd never considered the option. He'd never had a doubt that they'd make it through the troubles and get clear. At least that's what he told her, shaking his head and halfway growling. Like always. Looking at her sideways and asking, "Where'd you go today?" with his angry voice. "I saw you skip out on your chores. You didn't think I did, but I did. I watched you slip away."

He was always watching Tess. Her only freedom came during these errands to the market, or wherever.

And now she rounded a corner and saw her home. A big, dark, ranch-style house. With Paula beside her, she started down the hill and felt sorry that the errand was finished. She could have used some more time on her own.

"You and your dad farm?" asked Paula. "Is that it?"

Tess said, "Just up ahead, yeah," and gestured.

"Imagine," Paula cooed. "Farming in the middle of the city."

"It's an old city park," Tess explained. "We live beside it. We've always lived by it, and Father claimed it. Right after everything happened."

"The whole park?"

"A big piece of it. A sunny piece."

They were moving into the furnacelike wind. The aliens had stolen a string of houses here, plus whoever was inside. The empty lots were choked with spiny weeds and ragged trees. All at once, out of the corner of her eye, Tess saw a chunk of running carpet. Both of them saw it. Paula said, "A badger," and Tess added, "Filthy shits."

Paula didn't speak.

"Where do you come from?" asked Tess.

"A little town west of here."

"Yeah?"

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"I lived there with some other survivors. All of my family was gone, or dead, so we banded together and farmed nearby."

"Why'd you leave?" Tess wondered.

"I didn't want to grow old there," she said. "I woke up one morning and saw that. So I packed and left."

Tess waited a moment, then said, "My mother was killed by *them*."

"I'm sorry," Paula responded. As if she actually cared about a stranger who died eight years ago.

"And my brother was kidnapped," Tess added.

"I saw my whole family vanish." Paula was nodding and staring off into space. "Except for my baby brother, that is. The aliens just took most of his lungs and liver, and he died a couple days later. Thankfully."

Tess said, "Huh." Then she said, "What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Me, I got a little hole back here." Tess touched the spot. There wasn't even a scar. "And my father had a couple holes punched in his arm. *They* took blood from both of us, I guess."

"They didn't put holes in me." Paula shook her head and said, "They just stole my family. That's all."

She gave Tess a quick look. She seemed a little angry, as if she didn't like the way Tess was speaking about things. But who hadn't lost their family? she thought. Even the Pendletons, so rich and important, had had a big portion of themselves taken or killed.

Tess felt fortunate some days.

She was barely touched, after all.

Jack made her feel fortunate. Him and his singsong voice. He was like chaff left over after a harvest. That's how she thought of him. The useless debris after the grain is taken. Thank God she wasn't that way.

"Are there many kids in this area?" asked Paula.

"Not many."

"You ever get lonely?"

Tess was holding the grocery cart with both hands, braking it as it rolled down the slope. She didn't like being included with *kids*. "I don't get lonely," she claimed, and she shook her head. The aliens seemed to have preferred youngsters and young adults, and of course a lot of the survivors had left this region. Left for the coasts, most of them. She told Paula, "I don't have time for kids," and gave her a sideways glance.

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"I'm too busy working. I've got too much to do."

"I can believe it," Paula replied.

There were five or six thousand people left in town. Out of a couple hundred thousand to begin with. . . . Tess trying to imagine those vanished times, the noise and the press of so many bodies. . . .

Paula said nothing for a long moment.

Mr. Bumpers yawned once, his face nearly white in the sunlight.

"So," said Paula. "Do you think your dad will hire me?" She looked at Tess with sober eyes, then said, "Tell me the truth."

"Maybe," Tess lied.

"O.K.," Paula responded. "I see." She nodded as if she'd heard the true answer, "No," and then she stared off into space.

III

PERRY WALKED between rows of miserable corn, a hoe in one gnarled hand, and his straw hat riding forward on his head. He was a big man of average height, his chest thick and his arms thick and his oversized neck muscles showing whenever he clenched his teeth, gazing at the crops and wondering what else he might do.

Mostly he was a quiet, even-tempered man. At least he liked to think so. But the universe didn't seem to want him to be quiet and even-tempered. The universe had produced Pendleton, for instance. And Tess. And this deadly weather, too. It seemed to take great pleasure in conspiring against Perry's nervous system and gut, doing things sure to frustrate him or anger him until he felt jittery and tense, white-hot clouds of steam pressing at his insides, and his free hand stroking his belly in a useless bid to help lessen the pain.

The wind gusted, fiercely hot and absolutely dry.

Perry could hear a sound above the wind, distant and vague, and he turned, glancing toward the back porch of his house.

Two figures had just emerged. One of them waved, and for an instant — a silly, strange instant — he saw the wrong people standing on the porch. He saw Tess Senior, his wife, and behind her was Alex. Which was ridiculous, of course. Perry's mind was going fuzzy on him. He blinked and shook his head and looked down for a moment, retrieving his senses. This

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Then there was a beam of light entering straight through the bedroom wall...

wasn't the first time he'd felt confused. His wife and son, indeed! For a moment it was as if no alien spaceships had come. Nothing odd had happened in the world, and these dear people were fine. Just fine. In fact, they had come outside to look at Perry, wondering why he was walking about the park with a hoe in one hand.

He smiled at himself and started home.

Looking again, he realized it was Tess Junior. Of course. And someone he didn't recognize. A young woman, apparently.

He started to remember that day eight years ago. The illusion made it come back to him. Perry had gotten up early, like always. It was a Saturday, springtime, and he first heard the news on the kitchen radio. Astronomers had reported thousands of ships approaching — a great silvery mass of them — and various governments were putting their military on alert. Perry hurriedly woke Tess Senior and Alex, and the three of them watched the latest news on television. Another ten minutes of broadcasts, and they saw bright dots racing toward them. Losing velocity at an incredible rate, said the astronomers, but still moving faster than any human-made object.

The aliens hadn't made any attempt to contact people. Nor did they respond to any signals from Earth.

The view on television was from Hawaii, from a telescope perched on a dead volcano; and someone observed that the spaceships were entering the highest reaches of the atmosphere, diving like hawks. A prophetic statement. Then there was a flash of light, and Hawaii vanished. Gone. Then Perry said, "Huh?" and their electricity was cut off.

There was a battery-powered radio in the bedroom. Perry could remember rising and pulling the radio from the nightstand drawer, turning it on and hearing nothing but the roar of static. Tess Senior was with Alex in the living room, waiting, and Perry started back toward them. But then there was a beam of light entering straight through the bedroom wall and streaking past him. A couple of tiny tendrils punctured his arm, and he fainted. He crumbled, and then he was awake again, sprawled on the floor; and the light was gone, and there was an eerily smooth hole driven

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through the wall. He heard nothing but Bumpers wailing in the backyard. He rose and stumbled down the hallway and saw his wife and stopped. He froze. His wife was dead. Her chest and belly were collapsed, and there was a single wound as wide as his thumb just beneath her diaphragm. And where was Alex? "Alex?" he called. "What happened?" Then he heard Tess crying. Maybe Alex was with Tess, he reasoned, and he rushed to her bedroom and found her alone. She was untouched but for a little wound on the back of her neck. And the dog was wailing. And his wife was dead. And Alex had vanished. Eight years later, and he could remember the horror of the moment. It was barely diminished, even now. And he could remember the strange sudden weakness that came over him when he found the wounds on his own arm . . . the kind of wobbliness that comes to someone who has given too much blood.

"Father!" cried a voice.

Perry was back in the present. He looked up at the porch, spotting his daughter and the stranger. He gave a slow wave. Tess was holding her dog in her arms, and it was struggling. It wanted out of her grip. She said, "Come here!" to Perry, ignoring the fact that he was walking toward her in the first place. "I want you to meet someone!"

Perry slashed at weeds with his hoe. He didn't like Tess ordering him around, so he found reasons to delay. To frustrate her for a change. He chopped up some wild grass, then he noticed rabbit signs among the tomatoes. There were gnawed places and the pill-like pellets, and this wasn't good news. He was going to have to do some hunting soon, he realized. When he had a chance. Some night when it was dark and halfway cool, maybe.

Tess shouted down at him. "I got what you wanted!"

Perry came out of the garden, and he glanced at the stranger again. Then his daughter started down the steps, redwood planks creaking and her dog dripping everywhere. "This is Paula," said Tess. "Paula Something." She shrugged and turned and called to the dark girl. "This is my father. And out there," she said, gesturing with one hand, "out there is our plantation."

She said "plantation" with her satirical voice.

Perry felt the urge to slap her mouth. Not hard, no. And not to teach her any lesson. He just wanted her to know how he felt about that sharp tongue of hers. He'd done everything else imaginable, and still she acted

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like a bitch. An absolute terror. She seemed to think she didn't need manners or decency, at least when her father was about.

"I left the stuff inside," Tess informed him. She was beside him, and she put down her dog and picked up a second hoe. "It's in the kitchen."

A snarling tone. Perry bristled, watching his daughter smile and then glance up at the stranger. She probably figured she could say whatever she liked with an audience present. With a witness. She could have the smartest mouth in the world, and he'd have to wait to get angry.

Perry asked, "What does she want?" with a quiet, controlled voice.

"To ask you something. I guess." Tess had a sly expression. "You'd better let her ask it."

"You left everything in the kitchen?"

"Everything on the list—"

"But nothing's put away, is it?" He shook his head. "I bet you even left the meat out. Didn't you?"

"You told me to get it, and I got it," Tess whined. "And you told me to weed when I got home, so I'm going to weed. O.K.?"

Perry didn't waste a steely gaze. His daughter was too full of herself just now.

"Come on, Mr. Bumpers." She started leading her miserable dog out into the garden, into the blazing heat and wind. Perry watched its rocking gait and asked, "Does he need water? Tess?"

"He's fine," she replied. "I gave him some in the kitchen."

Which was impossible, he knew. He had used the last of yesterday's water doing dishes, and she hadn't even thought about giving him a drink. That was just like Tess. She loved the dog, but she could be so insensitive. So stupid. And still, after all the abuse, the dog followed her everywhere, loyal beyond every boundary of good sense and reason.

Someday, in one fashion or another, Perry was going to strike his daughter.

Tess would press things too far. She would shirk her chores one time too many, or something, and he would slap her good and hard. Not to change her behavior, no. He realized now that that wasn't why parents beat their kids. Not at all. They did it to prove that kids didn't have a lock on misbehaving.

That was why he would do it, he thought.

Sure.

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IV

"SHE SAID you wanted to ask a question," Perry told the Grant girl. They had just exchanged names and uncomfortable handshakes, and now both of them were in the house, in the big, fan-cooled kitchen, Perry putting the food away, and beginning to sort through the machine parts.

"I met your daughter at the store," said Paula. "She sure is pretty. And spirited, too."

"Spirited," he said. "That's the word."

Paula was putting items up on the countertop, helping without having to be asked. That was when Perry knew the question she wanted to ask. He'd had his suspicions, but now he was so sure that he put a firm, dry "No, thank you" into his mouth, waiting to tell her the answer at the first unrude moment.

Yet the girl must have sensed his mood. She looked at him and didn't say a word. Then she picked up a belt and told him, "This is shit."

"What?" he asked.

"The belt's garbage." She held it up to him. Sure enough. Perry saw where the aging rubber was cracking. He said, "That Pendleton bastard," with a low, unsurprised growl.

"Pulls this a lot, does he?"

"With Tess," Perry mentioned.

The girl nodded, making no other comment. She seemed pleasant, if somewhat plain. Kneeling on the floor, she said, "This cart doesn't have much pop. Tess mentioned that to me."

"It suits her," he groused. Then he gave the belt a few jerks, making the cracks more obvious.

"The batteries might be bad," Paula mentioned. "I could check."

Perry looked at her, at her intelligent eyes and the set of her mouth. Let the girl have her fun, he decided. It wasn't an important problem, not in the overall scheme of things. He said, "If you want—"

"Tools?" she asked.

"In the garage. You can take the cart out the side door—"

Paula was in motion. She pushed the empty cart out of the kitchen, and Perry decided to offer her food for her trouble. Whether she fixed anything or not. He heard banging and the crash of a toolbox, and he knew it

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wouldn't be easy to tell her the truth. She was welcome through lunch, and she could fill any canteens with water. But he was sorry. They couldn't afford another mouth. Not and keep this operation afloat, at least. He'd have to tell her soon, he knew. But not now. Not yet. Perry felt like delaying things for just a bit. He left through the back door, walking into the sun and holding his sore gut with one hand. I'll work awhile, he thought, and then I'll tell her. Sure. I'll give her a chance to get bored with the job, he decided. Then she won't take it so hard. Sure.

Tess was working slowly. Not a big surprise there. Either she saw him come out of the house and was trying to piss him off, or she was on one of those prolonged half-breaks that seemed to come every hour or so.

If it wasn't one thing eating him, it was another.

Perry ignored her. He didn't have the energy for this crap. He went down and cut over to a patch of high ground where a big-vaned windmill turned in the wind, bringing up a thin, cool stream of groundwater that had partway filled an old stock tank. This was their irrigation and drinking water. Every day, Perry filled two jugs and carried them to the house, and through the summer he tried to flood every part of the garden at least once every other day. If there was the water. What they needed, he knew, was a deeper well. From a richer stratum. But that was like a hundred other fantasies on his wish list. It wasn't sensible, and he was foolish to even dream about such things. Even in passing.

Years ago, when Tess was little and he was particularly hard-pressed, Perry had hired young men with talent and apparent toughness. But none of them had lasted longer than a week. They were wandering through town, like this girl, and as soon as the work got old and they got some insulation around their waists . . . well, they'd gone back to wandering. It was their natural state.

Perry couldn't see how it would be different this time.

That's why he refused everyone who came asking for work, and that's why he had his "No, thank you" waiting in his mouth now. He'd learned his lesson long ago.

But nonetheless. . . .

. . . nonetheless he'd hold off telling her until noon. Until then he worked. First he did the irrigating, making sure that half of the weeds and his scattered crops at least got their toes damp; and then he filled the big plastic jugs and carried them home. He kicked off his muddy boots and

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left them behind the porch stairs, and by the time he got inside, the jugs were threatening to rip his arms from their sockets. Tess was already eating, working hard on a brick of Cheddar cheese and some old bread. Perry paused for a moment, then he heard Paula in the garage. Still? He heard tools and motion, and he went through the side door to find the girl working on one of their two alcohol-fueled generators. The older generator. The cart itself was stripped of batteries and set aside. Paula glanced up and smiled. "We were right," she announced. "Its batteries were shot." She pulled a dirty air filter from the generator. "But I suppose they must be worth something anyway," she told him. "Pendleton will want the lithium, at least. Don't you think?"

Perry nodded. "He should—"

"Then I noticed this thing," she said. She dinged the generator with a wrench, explaining, "It needs some attention. It must be your backup, huh? I thought so. Anyway, I found spare parts, and thought while I was here—"

"Thanks," Perry managed.

"—and there's one more thing." She gestured at the driveway. "I took another liberty. I hope you don't mind."

He turned and saw their big parabolic mirror set on the pavement, throwing sunlight up into a huge iron pot. Vaguely embarrassed by her industry, he muttered, "Gosh," and scratched his head.

"I figured you'd want the venison tonight. You were way off, so I couldn't ask. So I took a chance." Paula was nervous. They were walking together to the end of the driveway, and she mentioned, "I know a recipe. The best thing for venison . . . if you don't mind. . . ."

Perry removed the heavy lid, using a rag to save his fingertips. He'd bought the stove from Pendleton and used it twice. Maybe three times. Most of the time, he cooked outdoors on a wood fire, fast and hot, and the meat ended up edible. That was his one goal as a cook.

Potatoes and carrots were in the mix, and Perry smelled them.

"Cook it slow," she said. "It keeps the juices in the meat, and the gamy taste gets hidden."

Perry replaced the lid.

"You two can eat it tonight," Paula offered. Her face turned serious and her eyes intense. She hadn't asked her question yet, and she wasn't going to ask it now. She knew better than to embarrass both of them, it seemed.

"Father?"

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Tess emerged from the house.

"What is it?" asked Perry.

"I'm tired. Can I take a nap?"

Then Perry made his decision. That one slight nudge from his lazy daughter, and Perry turned and looked at Paula. He said nothing, but nodded his head once. Just once. She didn't even have to ask the question, and now the answer was given. It was an easy decision, and he felt himself being buoyed up by a sudden emotion. It wasn't joy or peace or anything so simple. It was more a sense of being at the helm and knowing, just knowing, that he wasn't going to tumble over the ends of the world.

V

TESS AND Paula went to the market the next morning, taking the bad belt and the old batteries, and their instructions very specific. Paula was to try her hand in dealing with Mr. Pendleton. Tess wasn't to interrupt or otherwise make a fool of herself. "But what if we get screwed by him?" she'd asked Father. "What if he makes a fool of Paula? Huh?"

"Then she'll learn, won't she? She has to learn." He shook his head and smiled, saying, "Someday she can become as good of a negotiator as you. Wouldn't that be something?"

Satire. She realized it at once. Father had no faith in her abilities — he had told her so a thousand times — and she didn't appreciate these orders, and she certainly didn't see why she had to tag along. If she wasn't supposed to do anything, why bother even going? But then, she didn't want to stay home either. Not if she had to whack weeds all day again. So she went without complaining, pushing the dead cart. It was filled with all the useless shit they had found around the house, and this was what Paula was supposed to trade with. Garbage. Mr. Pendleton was going to have her for lunch, thought Tess. And she broke into a sly, quick smile.

Paula kept quiet as they walked. A couple times she asked about the neighborhood — what had the aliens stolen; what kinds of injuries had the survivors gotten — but mostly she was silent. Mr. Bumpers made more noise. He rode in the child seat, panting hard and whining. Sometimes Tess scratched his chin or an ear, making amends, and sometimes she talked about him to Paula. "He's my best friend in the world," she

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claimed. "Aren't you, Mr. Bumpers. Yes, you are. You are."

The market had just opened when they arrived. Jack Pendleton was standing near the front door, almost exactly where they'd left him yesterday. It was as if he hadn't moved in twenty-some hours. As if he didn't have the energy. His feminine hands were curled around the mop handle, and his wrong-sounding voice said, "You're staying at the Grissons', huh?" to Paula.

Paula said, "I guess so," and shrugged, smiling at him.

Tess took Mr. Bumpers. She didn't pay attention to the two of them talking, and then Paula saw Mr. Pendleton stocking shelves, and excused herself. She pushed the garbage-filled cart down toward him.

Tess had to linger with Jack. Out of the way.

They didn't talk often or for very long. Not normally. Their longest conversations were about harmless nothing — the weather; news from the coasts; what their fathers were angry about today — and then Tess would become painfully aware of Jack's condition. Suddenly some part of her mind would imagine how he might look, how he must be scarred, and she would become uncomfortable. Even angry. It was as if she resented Jack in some fashion, or maybe she felt threatened. He was maimed worse than anyone else in the world, but he was always so damned pleasant. As if he didn't care. Maybe that's what made Tess so angry. Jack kept acting as if it didn't matter, him castrated and all. It just didn't matter.

Today he was talking about the weather. "I sympathize with all you farmers," he was saying. "I was reading about our droughts the other night. About the way they're common around here. But when the droughts break, they do so in a big way. At least usually. So maybe next year will be wet. That's what I'm thinking. A wet spring and a perfect summer, and the corn tall and green. Wouldn't that be fine?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," Tess snapped. She was watching Paula and Jack's father. Paula raised a hand, twirling the bad belt in the air. Tess thought about last night and her sleeping in Alex's old room. Right next to Tess's room. How did she feel about it? Sometimes it was fun to have company. They'd talked a little bit while getting ready for bed. But seeing a stranger on her brother's bed, under his model airplanes and space shuttles and stuff . . . it did something to Tess. Paula was an intruder, and she didn't belong. At least not in their house. Not at night, she didn't.

Now Tess began rocking from foot to foot, thinking about everything

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at once. Paula and Father, plus Jack droning on about the heat.

Paula stuck a finger into Mr. Pendleton's chest. Jack quit talking, seeing it. They heard voices, the tension rising and Tess ready for things to turn ugly. Ugly would be fun. Mr. Pendleton would scream and refuse to do business with this upstart. Which would leave Tess with her old job, of course. And life would go back to being the same.

But that's not what happened.

All at once, with a flourish, Paula and Mr. Pendleton shook hands. And with his free hand, Mr. Pendleton tipped his imaginary hat. Would you look? thought Tess. Some kind of deal was struck.

Jack said, "Huh," with that wrong voice. And the wrongness of it made Tess want to laugh at him. Then she wasn't thinking of him at all.

She felt sick and strange now. Moving away from Jack and everyone, she pretended to shop. To browse. Mr. Bumpers kept close, and after a while Paula arrived with newer batteries and two shiny black belts in place of the bad one. Plus there was an assortment of new garbage in the basket — soft plastic widgets and wooden dowels and such. Tess didn't see the purpose in them. Paula had traded garbage for garbage, it seemed. Then she thought, Good. Let Father get furious. That would be the best possible thing in the world, she decided.

Tess lifted Mr. Bumpers and walked outside. "See you," she told Jack in passing.

"Bye, Tess. You have a nice day."

She assumed Paula would follow straightaway, but it took a couple minutes. She came out with the cart on her heels and its eye pivoting, and she smiled as if everything was perfect in the world.

They were heading home, when Tess asked, "What's the crap for?" Her voice was abrasive. Urgent. "What do you want with it?"

Paula didn't pay attention to her mood. "Well," she allowed, "part of it's for Mr. Bumpers. If he wants." She paused, then explained, "I've done this sort of thing before. For people and pets. I thought I could make him a plastic limb. With a foam pad and straps."

Tess listened, feeling unsure what she should feel.

"If he doesn't like it," promised Paula, "then at least we tried."

"He's gotten along fine for eight years now," said Tess.

"I know."

"I mean, why change? He won't even remember how to walk normally, I

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bet. And I don't see how a chunk of damned plastic could be normal, anyway."

"Maybe it will help."

Tess was furious, but she couldn't see why.

"No harm in giving it a go," Paula claimed.

And Tess was walking faster, hurrying ahead, fury making her skin tingle and tears fill her eyes. She walked with her arms crossed on her chest as if she was horribly cold. Why was she so angry? she wondered. She didn't know. A black, black mood falling from nowhere, and she was trying to walk her way through it. She was trying to get free.

VI

THE EXTRAORDINARY happened after dinner that night. Perry belched leftover venison and looked around, discovering that there was still an hour of daylight, and nothing important needed to be done. Their immediate work was finished; and since sunlight was still filtering in through the windows, Tess could read from her schoolbooks, and Paula could work on the dog's fake leg, and everyone could actually rest. It was remarkable, he thought. Remarkable, and he didn't want to believe it. He didn't want himself to become spoiled.

Paula asked if they ever considered livestock.

"Small things," she explained. "I mean like rabbits or chickens. Have you ever thought about raising them?"

Sure. A thousand times, sure. But Perry didn't want to cope with caring for them and getting their feed, and diseases were a huge problem, too. Weren't they? "If they raised themselves," he said, "maybe. But they need so much babying. We don't have the time."

"I was in charge of our coop," said Paula. "If you want, I can draw up plans and try to figure the feed and such. For chickens. We might be able to work something out."

"Think so?" asked Perry.

"Pendleton would pay dearly for eggs and meat. I bet."

"I bet you're right." He nodded, saying, "If we can do it, sure."

Tess looked up from her book, watching Paula with a tight, unreachable expression. The two girls hadn't spoken since returning this morning, and Perry wondered if he should say something or do something. Was there a

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situation that needed to be defused? Or was it smarter to let them come to grips with it? He didn't know. He opted for the latter, for now, and began discussing this coop business in earnest.

Eventually they shifted to Paula's old home and the town.

She spoke about irrigation and weed control — the sorts of things Perry had had to learn about on his own over these past few years — and then she was talking about her family, naming names and describing their fates, her eyes showing emotion while her voice held steady and dry.

Then Perry answered in kind. It had been an age since he'd discussed such things with anyone. He mentioned where his wife was buried, pointing toward the park, and he admitted to wondering about Alex. Whatever happened to his son? Sometimes, at odd times, Perry found himself believing that he was alive somewhere. Alive, and happy, too. He couldn't picture how such a thing would be possible; but nonetheless, it had a calming effect on him. Just the image of Alex grown up, with his own family, had a tangible worth.

Paula nodded, finished with the peg leg just now. She put it down and said, "I think the same things about my father." Her hands began to fiddle with a square patch of dense yellow foam. She had a vial of homemade glue waiting, and she dabbed it onto the leg's socket, adding the foam and holding everything in place with one finger.

"I keep thinking, hoping, whatever," Perry confessed, "that the aliens had some sort of plan. They were cruel bastards, sure, but there was some purpose behind it. Something worthwhile."

"Like people scooping fish and fish eggs from a pond?" asked Paula.

"I suppose."

"That's the way I look at it." She nodded, telling him, "That's why they took what they took, I keep guessing. Houses? Cars? All sorts of nonsense. We're like fish, and they wanted some of us in another pond. You suppose?"

"Some other world?" Perry squinted, trying to imagine a funny-colored sky and sun. "Sure."

"Sometimes," said Paula, "I picture them working crops and living in the houses ripped off the Earth. And at night they sit around, like this, and they worry about us."

"Us?"

"Like we worry about them." She nodded. "I guess it's reassuring for me.

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I paint them on some big wilderness world with the time and energy to feel concerned about us."

Perry considered for a moment, then said, "That doesn't seem all that crazy. Not after everything else that's happened, no."

"So why'd they take my mother's insides?" asked Tess. She was looking at Paula, eyes fiery. "Why'd they have to kill her like that?"

Perry felt himself become tense. He stared at his daughter, and she pretended not to notice.

"If what you're saying is so," she complained, "why'd they chop up everything and everyone? If all they wanted to do is move some of us —?"

"Tess," Perry growled.

Tess straightened, her face stiff and defiant.

Paula nodded. Her own expression was composed, patient, and alert. Her eyes were fixed on some far point, her mouth pursed for a long moment, and then opening, speaking, telling them, "Maybe the aliens had to have spare parts for some reason. Maybe they needed blood and organs so they could remake the people they took —?"

"Remake?" echoed Perry.

"I'm guessing," she admitted. "But maybe on this other world, maybe, people need two hearts and bigger livers. Plus more meat and bone and blood. The aliens came and took what they needed as fast as they could." And she paused. She seemed to be considering the incredible things she was saying. "They treated us awful," she stated. "I wish they hadn't come here, and I wish they hadn't done any of it. But this is how I look at things and make them halfway sensible."

No one spoke for a long moment.

Perry tried to imagine entities so far removed from people, so terribly advanced, that they would look at the Earth as a place full of building blocks. Wasn't that what she was saying? People and car engines and big maple trees . . . a crazy assortment of blocks free for the taking, free for the rearranging. . . . It was insane, sure. But what wasn't at this point? Huh?

The dog lay beside Tess on the sofa.

Paula asked, "Do you want to give this a try?" She seemed to be talking to the dog.

Tess pretended not to hear her.

Perry said, "Tess. The leg is ready."

His daughter rolled her eyes once, then said, "Now?"

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"Don't whine," he told her.

She breathed and looked at the dog, then she picked it up and carried it to Paula. Tess's face was hard, stony, but she moved the flat stump as Paula wanted, and in no time the peg leg was strapped into place. Perry was amazed by how secure it looked, the translucent plastic tapering down to a rubber cap with a disk-shaped, paw-sized end.

The dog sniffed at the new part of its anatomy.

"Mr. Bumpers," said Tess. "What do you think?" Her voice was flat and steady. "Mr. Bumpers?"

"Let him walk on it," said Paula. She sat with her hands in her lap, fingers intertwined, and Tess rose and crossed the living room, her mouth closed and tense. "Call him," Paula suggested. "Please?"

"Sweetie," said Tess. "Come here, Bumpers. Come here, sweetie."

The dog started to walk in the familiar way, rocking and throwing its heavy shoulders onto the good leg. But the peg leg got tangled up with it. Down went the dog, hard on its chin; but Perry had to applaud the mutt. It got up again, fell even harder, then rose once more and managed to find the rhythm. It crossed the last couple yards without stumbling; and for an instant, from his vantage point, the dog almost seemed intact. A fat old mutt, and it was nearly running.

"Oh sweetie," said Tess. She started tinkering with the straps.

"What are you doing?" asked Perry.

Tess said nothing.

"Don't take that off," Perry warned.

"Why not?" Tess told them, "It didn't work. It got in his way —"

"But you have to give him time," said Paula. Her voice was tight and sour, hinting at some frustration under everything. "You have to let him get accustomed to the thing."

"But it's stupid." Tess couldn't manage the straps. Perry could hear her breathing, quick and light, and he watched in horror as she grabbed the plastic leg and gave it a sudden jerk. She pulled it clean off the stump, and the dog yelped and spun away and then whimpered. It shook and lay down and licked its stump and the torn patches of fur.

Perry said, "Tess? What in hell's name —?"

"We don't want this!" she snapped. She threw the plastic limb at Paula, saying, "There! Take it!"

Perry rose. "That's enough. I want you in bed, and now! Do you hear me!?"

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Tess glared at him. She was tough and crumbling in the same instant. Her mouth was set, defiant and self-assured, and her eyes became watery and bright as she stood, saying, "Fine," and picking her dog up. "I was going to bed anyway."

"So go!"

"Fine!" She left them, storming down the hallway and slamming her door behind her. Then they heard her wailing and stomping on the floor, and Perry looked at Paula. He felt like apologizing for everything. But before he could speak, Paula told him, "It's a tough age. Fourteen."

"For everyone," he allowed. Then he said, "Only, she's been like this for years," and he sighed.

"Really?"

"When she was a little girl," said Perry, "and I mean *before*, she was the nicest, warmest, sweetest girl in the world."

Paula was watching him, holding the plastic leg in one hand and just listening.

"A real doll," he said. "But I guess losing her mother and brother, and everything else . . . it's made a mess of her. Her temper. These moods. You know? She's nothing like she was."

"Really," said Paula.

Perry sighed and shook his head and said, "No. No, she's not."

VII

TESS LISTENED to them talking for a long, long while. She lay in the growing darkness with the sheets thrown back and Mr. Bumpers too hot for the bed, his body belly-down on the middle of the floor, and some kind of dream making him jerk and whine every so often. Tess could hear Father and that stranger discussing God knows what, only she couldn't make out the words. Which made it worse. All she knew for certain was their tone and rhythm. So steady. So comfortable. She couldn't recall her father ever, ever speaking to anyone for so long.

Tess practically trembled, her mind's eye coming up with all sorts of possibilities, each more vivid than the last. She kept wishing that she would stop thinking; she wanted to relax and close her eyes and sleep, really sleep. But the house was still hot; and her nerves were frazzled. Even

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when she heard Paula coming to bed, all the conversing finished at last, Tess couldn't quite fall asleep. She had to listen to the sounds from Alex's bedroom. One-person sounds, she noted. But even that good news didn't mollify her for long.

The night air was humid and still and quite stale.

Mr. Bumpers rose and lurched about the room before settling inches from his last position.

Tess shifted in bed, once and then again. Then she heard the distinct creak of a hinge. Alex's bedroom door was opening, and Paula was in the hallway. Tess heard her walking past the bathroom and out of earshot, and she sat up and bit her lip and listened in silence. Paula didn't return. Where did she go? Tess couldn't help but climb out of the bed and dress in the dark. Where was Paula? She had to find out; she just had to.

Tess started toward Father's bedroom, walking on her toes and finding his door shut and hoping to hear him snoring. He had a deep, abrasive snore most nights. But not now. Tess shivered and crept right up to the door, cocking her head and listening, expecting . . . what? Them in bed together, that's what. She could see it so clearly with her mind's eye. So clearly that it took a moment for her to realize that nobody was behind the door. She was alone in the house, completely alone. Of course. They went outdoors to do it, she knew. Of course.

Tess went out onto the back porch, scanning the dark garden for signs of motion, trying to hear anything out of place. It was cooler outside. Even pleasant. For an instant she thought she heard voices from a certain direction, and she went down the stairs with a minimum of noise, striking out through the tomatoes and the corn.

There were voices, yes.

She heard them again, closer now, coming from the south edge of the garden.

She heard Paula laughing.

Tess had them.

She felt vindicated for all her fears, and she was even angrier than before. She was furious, white-hot with jealousy and glad of it. The emotions made her sure about what to do, carrying her along without any reason to think or doubt. She saw motions ahead. In the starry gloom, she could see two heads and then two people. They were holding each other. Paula had her arms around her father, Tess was sure, and she was practically running

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at them. She was going to confront them and ruin things right now, she was. . . . But then a stalk of something broke underfoot, and the two faces turned toward the sound. Tess saw Paula and another face, not her father's face, and she blinked and squinted and recognized Jack Pendleton.

They were dressed, the two of them. Cuddling and talking and dressed.

Tess froze. Then she managed a breath and turned and ran away. She streaked back to the house, halfway crying. Mr. Bumpers was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, and she grabbed him and clung to him and went back inside. Father was standing in the kitchen, using a little camping flashlight for light. He was cleaning half a dozen dead rabbits with a small knife, their skin peeled free and their meat showing pink and slick.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

He was still angry, she knew. His tone said as much.

"It's hot," she told him. And she put Mr. Bumpers down.

"Get some sleep," he growled. "We've got a full day of it tomorrow."

She said, "Yeah," and retreated to the back of the house, to her bed, and stripped again to her underwear. She lay down and listened to Father finishing in the kitchen, then going to bed himself. After a while she heard his reliable snoring, comforting and steady. Then someone was in

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the hallway, pausing outside her door and waiting.

Tess didn't breathe.

A knock came, soft and steady.

She said, "Yeah!" and Paula came inside. Mr. Bumpers gave a little growl, rose and sniffed and rocked toward Paula, apologizing with a few wet licks to her toes.

Paula asked, "Why were you out there? Were you just walking?"

Tess watched her, saying nothing.

"Tell me you were walking," said Paula. "That you couldn't sleep, and so you went out for a stroll."

"Tess asked, "Why?"

"Because I don't want to think you were spying on me."

Tess shifted her weight. She said, "All right. I was walking. That's all."

"Fine, then. That's O.K." She knelt and scratched Mr. Bumpers behind both ears, and he slumped and rolled onto his back and moaned when his belly was rubbed.

"But why Jack?" asked Tess.

"Why not?"

She shook her head and said, "He's no good. I mean, he's castrated, for God's sake —"

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"He's a warm, caring, decent individual, Tess." Paula was watching her and speaking in a colorless, certain voice. "But you don't see that, do you?"

"He's a steer," Tess snapped. "That's all."

Paula didn't speak for a long while. Then she asked, "Does it occur to Tess, that maybe the aliens stole more than just things that you can see and touch? That they stole from us in other ways, too?"

"What do you mean? Like what?"

Paula sighed and said, "Like compassion, for instance. And patience, too." She stood and said, "Do you see what I mean?"

"That's stupid," Tess announced. "The same as that crap about *them* using us like building blocks. It's all stupid."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Well, then." Paula looked down and said, "Would you like to sleep with me, Mr. Bumpers? Come on." And she scooped him up and scratched his belly, saying, "Aren't you a sweetie?" as she began to leave.

"Bring him back," Tess muttered.

Paula paid no attention to her.

"Hey!" she snapped. "Don't!" Then she jumped up and grabbed her dog by the hind leg, jerking so hard that he spun and reflexively bit her hand. He put his canines into her flesh, and Tess shrieked and fell back as Mr. Bumpers twisted free and dropped to the floor.

He hobbled out of the room, gone.

Tess was devastated, huddled in a ball and weeping.

Paula watched her for a moment, her face calm. Composed. Then she said, "Maybe you're right. Maybe the aliens didn't take anything from you." She knelt and put a hand to Tess's shoulder, saying, "But don't you see? Something is wrong. Don't you feel it, dear?"

Tess shivered. That's all she could do.

Paula gave her a hug and made soft, reassuring sounds.

Then Tess sniffed and managed to say, "Maybe Alex has them. You think?"

"Has them?"

"My compassion. Patience. That stuff." Tess whimpered and said, "Do you think so? Really?"

"Shush," said Paula. "Shush."

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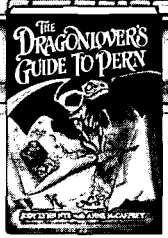

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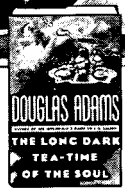

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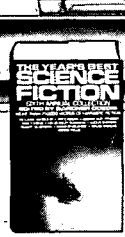

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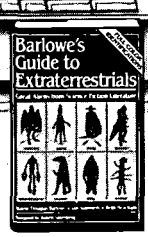

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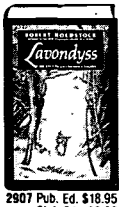

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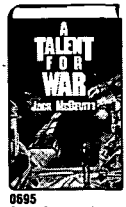

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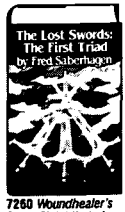

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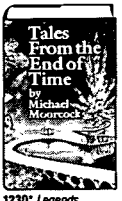

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